

# SUMMER CAMPS AND CIVIL WAR: DECONSTRUCTING THE HUTHI REBELLION IN YEMEN

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## ABSTRACT

This project investigates the rise of the Yemeni insurgent group, Ansar Allah (commonly known as the Huthis), from its conception in the summer camps of the Zaidi Believing Youth movement to its successful rebellion against the Yemeni government in September 2014. The Huthi movement gained a large following by protesting government corruption, injustice, and Saudi and American activity in Yemen. A constructivist analysis of these grievances reveals flaws in the Yemeni nation-state building process due to nationalist narratives created in opposition to Zaidism—the second most practiced branch of Islam in Yemen and a defining element of Huthi identity. Under the guise of a “transitional democracy,” the Yemeni state developed as a pluralist authoritarian regime that marginalized Zaidi communities. Anti-Zaidi discourse created exclusionary categories of Yemeni identity, which were intensified by a series of hostile interactions between the state and Huthi leaders. In 2004, the state rationalized violence against the Huthis by framing them as a “national security threat” and an Iranian proxy. These discourses mobilized additional domestic and international actors against the Huthis and catalyzed a series of conflicts that culminated in the current civil war. Overall, the Huthis’ journey from summer camps to militancy was driven by marginalization in the new Yemeni nation-state, perceived threats from Saudi Arabia and the United States, and the explosion of state violence against dissent.

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## INTRODUCTION

On September 21, 2014, the chant, “God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Victory to Islam!” rang through Yemen’s capital, Sa’na, as Ansar Allah, a rebel group also known as the Huthis, barricaded streets and demanded the resignation of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The Huthis used this slogan not to incite violence, but to exercise their right to freedom of speech while protesting government corruption, injustice, and regional neo-imperialism. This slogan resonated with many Yemenis who suffered for decades under an oppressive regime that the international community considered a transitional democracy. The Huthis rose to power as a group who subverted state rhetoric that purported a supposed dedication to the Yemeni people’s freedom and pursuit of happiness.

The story of the Huthis is deeply embedded in the history of modern Yemen, a state fashioned in 1990 from separate southern and northern entities; Paul Dresch explains that, “the wish for a single Yemeni state emerged in a context shaped by outside powers.”<sup>2</sup> The Huthi movement was directly shaped by these forces. In pursuit of a nation-state in the idealized Western model, state leaders constructed a “modern” Yemeni national identity in opposition to Zaidism, a branch of Shi’a Islam often practiced by Huthis and associated with the previous regime—a Zaidi imamate that ruled northern Yemen until 1962. Zaidism was also attacked by Wahhabi missionaries from neighboring Saudi Arabia as the country sought to assert regional hegemony by influencing Yemen’s state and society.<sup>3</sup> The Huthi movement originated from the Believing Youth movement, an organization that operated summer camps dedicated to Zaidi education. The Huthis’ journey from summer camps to militancy was driven by marginalization in the new Yemeni nation-state, perceived threats from Saudi Arabia and the United States, and the explosion of state violence against the movement.

This claim situates the evolution of the Huthi movement within broader postcolonial critiques of international norms that glorify the liberal nation-state as the ideal form of governance.<sup>4</sup> In theory, the liberal nation-state is a model

<sup>2</sup> Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Wahhabism is a Sunni branch of Islam that rejects all human interpretations of Islam and advocates for fundamentalist direct interpretation of the Qur’an.

<sup>4</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto, CA:

of morality and rationality: no group of people should be marginalized based on identity, and the state develops objective laws to protect individual rights.<sup>5</sup> However, the quest of many postcolonial state builders for a homogenous nation and centralized state has resulted in intense conflict between different groups who compete for resources and representation in the national government.<sup>6</sup> As top-down identity construction creates rigid categories of inclusion and exclusion, homogenous nationalisms—which link a singular identity to territory—can exacerbate differences between groups of people in many young states.<sup>7</sup> As a result, a state’s morality must be questioned when it employs violence against groups that it deems threats to national security. This essay examines the Yemeni state’s systematic violence against the Huthis and explores how decades of divisive identity politics have created significant obstacles to peace among warring parties in the current civil war.

Since the Yemeni state’s invasion of the Huthi base in northern Yemen in 2004, war has ravaged the country. While the first series of Huthi conflicts—the Sa’da Wars—ended in 2010, the state’s inability to control warring parties allowed the Huthis to gain power and territory.<sup>8</sup> In 2014, the Huthis dismantled the ruling regime and catalyzed the current civil war. Spring 2019 marks the fifth year of this war. It is currently one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, with 14.3 million people in need of food, safe water, and healthcare.<sup>9</sup> The former Yemeni state only exists in name; as such, the Huthis’ greatest threat is a Saudi-led coalition backed by the United States.<sup>10</sup> Saudi-led airstrikes have caused 60%

Stanford University Press, 2003); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Youssef Cohen et al., “The Paradoxical Nature of State Making: The Violent Creation of Order,” *American Political Science Review* 75.4 (1999): 901-910; Sankaran Krishna. *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> See Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*; Benjamin Maitre, “What Sustains ‘Internal Wars’? The Dynamics of Violent Conflict and State Weakness in Sudan,” *Third World Quarterly* 30.1 (2009): 53-68; Farid El-Khazen and Farid al-Hazin, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon, 1967-1976* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 357.

<sup>9</sup> “Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen Remains Worst in the World, Warns UN,” *UN News*. Published February 14, 2019. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1032811>.

<sup>10</sup> Mohamad Bazzi, “The United States Could End The War in Yemen If It Wanted To,” *The Atlantic*, published September 30, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/>

of civilian casualties, and many surmise that the war would have already ended if not for abundant Saudi military resources.<sup>11</sup> Resolving this conflict requires nuanced international diplomacy that looks beyond state frameworks as Yemen must transcend decades of state-inflicted national trauma.

This study is organized in two major sections. First, the literature review investigates how the nation-state has been normalized as a global emblem of social, economical, and political progress. However, critiques of the liberal nation-state's rationality and morality reveal exclusionary binaries that deem all challenges to a state's power as irrational and immoral. Sankaran Krishna's concept of "postcolonial anxiety" puts forth a theoretical framework which aims to explain how postcolonial states that pursue Western models of nation-state construction struggle to achieve unity, democracy, and success in the world order.<sup>12</sup> Within the categorical hierarchies of the liberal nation-state, minority resistance to state homogenization and centralization can be framed as national security threats that legitimize state violence, which in turn may trigger violent rebellions.<sup>13</sup>

In the second section, I examine how discourse between the Yemeni state, Huthi leaders, and other religious leaders fueled the rise of the Huthis between 1962 and 2004. The subsections, "Exclusionary Narratives in the Yemeni Nation-State" and "The Sunnization of Upper Yemen," explore anti-Zaidi discourses advanced by both the state and Wahhabi religious leaders. Thereafter, I turn to narratives in the Zaidi cultural revival that arose in response to marginalization. State oppression persisted despite Zaidi civil protests, leading the Huthi movement's founder, Husayn al-Huthi, to take a radical stance against the Yemeni government and the international community. I conclude by exploring how state discourse justified violence against the Huthi movement in 2004, as well as how this rhetoric permitted the entry of additional actors, thereby setting the foundations for the complex civil war that Yemen faces today. This approach to the Huthi movement allows one to understand how rhetoric

archive/2018/09/iran-yemen-saudi-arabia/571465/.

<sup>11</sup> Ravina Shamdasani, "Press Briefing Note on Yemen, Cambodia, Cuba, Nicaragua and Montenegro," *Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights*, published May 11, 2018. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23071&LangID=E>.

<sup>12</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, xix.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

constructs reality, as well as to identify the inherent connections between identity and violence.

## CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE MODERN WORLD

The liberal nation-state as an emblem of social, political, and economic progress solidified at the end of the Cold War, as Francis Fukuyama famously declared that “the unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism” marked the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”<sup>14</sup> However, the nation-state’s superiority is not natural. It has been constructed over the past two centuries to serve Western interests, and its claim to universality aims to discredit all other forms of social organization. This section will explore how the liberal nation-state was constructed through exclusionary binaries that allow a strong centralized state and homogenous national identity to serve as symbols of progress in opposition to sub-identities (such as the local, religious and ethnic) that are defined as traditional and backwards. In Yemen, the state used this dichotomy to frame the provincial Huthi movement as backwards and a national security threat to merit state violence and foreign intervention.

Although liberal values associated with the nation-state are often framed as universal and natural, they are only as old as the Enlightenment. Thinkers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed the concept of natural rights in response to European religious wars, as well as the ontological divide between the natural and the supernatural that arose from the scientific revolution.<sup>15</sup> The logic of natural rights led Enlightenment thinkers to advocate for a new form of governance based on the social contract. As popular rights were established through post-Enlightenment revolutionary movements in the Western world, nationalism developed as a secular myth that naturalizes territorial claims, creates an often ahistorical narrative of national progress, and defines a collective identity based on shared values and loyalty to the sacred state.<sup>16</sup> Fitzgerald explains that Enlightenment thinkers promoted civic identity to transcend sub-identities within a territory and developed the rule of law to institutionalize and protect equality

<sup>14</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, 16 (1989): 3.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 219.

<sup>16</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 33.

among citizens.<sup>17</sup> As a result, nationality is seen as an equalizing force among diverse populations.<sup>18</sup> Benedict Anderson views the nation as “an imaginary political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign... members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Ernest Gellner defines the state as an “institution or set of institutions specifically concerned with the enforcement of order (whatever else they may also be concerned with).”<sup>20</sup> Gellner explains that since the 18th century, the nation and the state have been bound to each other as “nationalism holds that they [nations and states] were destined for each other; that either without the other is incomplete, and constitutes a tragedy.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Anderson highlights that French and American nationalism embraced the notion of nationhood as a journey, in which people within state territory possessed a collective past, present, and future.<sup>22</sup> As such, citizenry had full control of their destiny as rightful state sovereigns. The idea that the liberal nation-state is the most moral and modern form of governance has been promoted for centuries by influential figures such as John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), and Robert Dahl (1915-2014).<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the nation-state’s constructed moral superiority, Anderson sees nationalism as a mark of modernity and highlights three mechanisms that catalyze national consciousness.<sup>24</sup> First, print capitalism unified people across a vast territory under narratives that made possible a common national past, present, and future. Second, a strong centralized state and bureaucracy could define a nation’s territory and establish national institutions to cultivate ideal citizens. Lastly, globalization, spurred by technological innovation, diffused

<sup>17</sup> Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular*, 220.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ernest Gellner and John Breuilly, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Pavel Barsa, “The Limits of the Nation-State or Deconstruction the Anarchy/Community Dichotomy of Modern Politics,” *Perspectives* 14 (2004): 8.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

concepts of nationhood among postcolonial third wave nation-states. The idea that modernization is inherently connected to the nation-state has informed Western foreign policy for decades, justifying American intervention in societies that function against liberal notions of freedom and democracy.<sup>25</sup> This approach was especially promoted by Cold War modernization theorists such as Daniel Lerner, who emphasizes that any society can achieve status in the modern political and economic system by moving past “subcultures of peasantry” and emulating the actions and ideas that helped the West move beyond backwardness and intolerance.<sup>26</sup> To this day, this rhetoric pressures non-Western states to adopt the nation-state model in order to conform to Western standards of morality and modernity.<sup>27</sup>

Many postcolonial theorists, however, argue that this pressure creates challenges for postcolonial societies attempting to achieve status through following the Western model of state building. Sovereignty, and by extension, foreign policy, is defined in opposition to “the Other,” as borders “express the decisive demarcation between inside and outside, between self and other, identity and different, community and anarchy that is constitutive of our modern understanding of political space.”<sup>28</sup> Enlightenment thought established sovereignty of the people, but “in order to materialize this idea it was necessary to know who ‘the people’ are.”<sup>29</sup> Similar to sovereignty, nationhood develops in opposition to an “Other,” and Barsa points out that “natural rights [are] gradually nationalized, that is imbued with ethnic, cultural, and particular content.”<sup>30</sup> The character of natural rights differs in each nation, and as the state monopolizes legitimate violence to protect those rights, it also has the right to exercise violence against domestic and foreign parties deemed threats to national security. Therefore, the state is able to promote any idea as objective, rational, or moral, and punish any idea it deems threatening.

Thus, the nation-state may not be a universal, moral, and modern form of governance as it simply normalizes Enlightenment ideals. It has been constructed through exclusionary dichotomies that both assert Western superiority over non-

<sup>25</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> Hemant Shah, *The Production of Modernization: Daniel Lerner, Mass Media, and the Passing of Traditional Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Barsa, “The Limits of the Nation-State,” 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

conforming states, and state superiority over citizens. The following two sections will expand on critiques of this hegemonic model. Sankaran Krishna's concept of postcolonial anxiety refers both to the pressure to follow the Western nation-state model and the unfeasible reality of this project.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, efforts to construct a homogenous nation and centralized state often exacerbate inequality between citizens through identity categories of inclusion and exclusion. These dichotomies also allow the state to exercise legitimate violence upon threatening outgroups.

### POSTCOLONIAL ANXIETY

In his book, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, Krishna examines in detail the effects of hegemonic conceptions of the state and the nation on postcolonial societies. He coins the term "postcolonial anxiety" to describe the desire of state leaders and elites to construct a national past, present, and future that are "mimetic constructions of what has supposed to have happened elsewhere, namely Europe and the West."<sup>32</sup> However, this anxiety can cause state-builders to defer democracy and marginalize minority groups for the sake of establishing a strong centralized state and homogenous nation.

The Republic of Yemen exemplifies a failed postcolonial state. While North Yemen was never colonized, England occupied South Yemen until 1967.<sup>33</sup> The two Yemens unified as a republic in 1990, and Yemenis proudly "entered modernity" with a constitution that promised democracy.<sup>34</sup> However, Yemen's first President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, weakened opposition and national cohesion with a divide-and-rule policy gilded with nationalist, but exclusionary rhetoric. He used selective patronage to exacerbate tension among elites and perpetuated a crisis management system where the state was the only body that could mediate conflict.<sup>35</sup> Saleh repeatedly deferred elections by claiming he had to first build a stable state. When elections eventually occurred in 1999, Saleh manipulated

<sup>31</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, xix.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Sara Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism* (New York: Springer, 2008), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 10.



them in his favor.<sup>36</sup> Saleh's government relied on oil revenues and only gave money to constituents when patronizing different elites. As the international community wished to protect the "pluralist" transitional democracy, the Saleh regime was able to last over two decades as a result of foreign aid and widespread electoral manipulation.<sup>37</sup> This section will review the obstacles that postcolonial states face when attempting to catch-up to the West, which include the inability to craft a post-Enlightenment style nation-building story, the reality of borders, and the creation of divisive identity politics during national homogenization processes.

In state-building efforts, post colonial societies struggle primarily with proliferating the clean and linear nationalist narratives of the Western world which are able to transcend complicated domestic dynamics by promoting a story of a universal culture and civilization.<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey Herbst argues that artificial borders, such as those created by the Berlin Conference or Sykes-Picot Agreement, have created conditions for "failed states."<sup>39</sup> The idea of predatory state-building in our globalized world seems impossible and apocalyptic, but artificial borders also perpetuate war. Regardless, postcolonial leaders' aspirations for a successful nation-state according to the Western model persist. Krishna explains, "from the complexity and contingency of what happened in Europe, the story of an ideal form of nation building is abstracted and becomes the model against which colonial pasts and futures are evaluated, found wanting, and, by closer imitation, redemption is sought."<sup>40</sup> The nation, cultivated through technological innovation, is a symbol of modernity as well as an idealized symbol of state legitimacy, as it governs with the consent of a people presumed to be unified by shared values and identities. In an era defined by a liberal world order and intense global economic competition, the nation-state appears as the only path to successful governance.

Jacques Derrida's logic of *différance* highlights the impossible ideal of the liberal nation-state and the dire implications of postcolonial anxiety.<sup>41</sup> Krishna

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>38</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey Herbst, "The Creation and Maintenance of National Boundaries in Africa," *International Organization* 43.4 (1989): 673-692.

<sup>40</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Différance refers to how social meanings are constructed through defining oneself in opposition to another, and one cannot perceive of an absolute identity in the endless chain of signifier and signified as it is constantly changing in opposition to another.

connects an integral component of many nationalisms—the metaphor of nation as a journey—to *différance*:

[The logic of *différance*] undergirds the legitimacy of the state by securing it for both time and space. Time in the idea that the journey toward achieving a nation has just begun. There is much that has to be reversed: the state literally buys time for itself as it deflects the adverse judgment of civil society ‘for the time being.’ It secures space for autonomous action by deploying the argument that divisiveness and difference would only delay the national journey”.<sup>42</sup>

Postcolonial state-builders are often in a rush to secure power. Some may sincerely pursue a state governed by a majority consent, while others may operate under rhetoric that promises democracy while secretly securing authoritarianism.<sup>43</sup> Regardless, most use normative conceptions of nationhood to rationalize the centralization of power at the expense self-determination.<sup>44</sup> As ideas of statehood and nationhood are defined through self/other binaries, constructions of nationhood that deny internal diversity generate conflict as identity differences are exacerbated under forceful efforts to homogenize populations and centralize institutions. Therefore, the “moment of arrival as a nation is deferred endlessly in the postcolony” as diverse populations may never achieve sovereignty under forceful state efforts to homogenize citizens and consolidate power.<sup>45</sup>

In his book, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, William Connolly deepens our understanding of the continuous formation of pluralism that produces postcolonial anxiety. Many state-builders take a pluralist approach in order to accommodate multiple powerful sub-groups within their borders.<sup>46</sup> Maintaining a stable, pluralist regime is a mark of great state strength and manifests the

<sup>42</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy in Regional Perspective*, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 19.

<sup>46</sup> William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), x.

beauty of tolerance and unification in the modern state.<sup>47</sup> Yet Saleh's pluralized authoritarian regime disguised as a pluralist transitional democracy illustrates the persistence of postcolonial anxiety. Connolly explains that "social *pluralism*...is often presented as an achievement to be protected, while the eruption of new drives to *pluralization* are often represented as perils to this achievement."<sup>48</sup> Processes of pluralization are perceived as especially dangerous to budding states. Like Krishna, Connolly ties a regime's fear of pluralization to normative conceptions of identity and the narrative of nationhood as a journey. According to Connolly, conventional pluralism may overlook how a dominant narrative threatens marginal identities and views groups as threats "by implicitly treating the congealed results of past struggles as if they constituted the essential standard of reasonableness or justice itself."<sup>49</sup> This results in generalizations about complex identities that are used by states to legitimize violence.

#### THE "SELF," THE "OTHER," AND THE LEGITIMATION OF VIOLENCE

As demonstrated above, the nation-state as an emblem of progress has been constructed to deem any other form of social organization inferior and retrogressive, thereby meriting state violence or foreign intervention against groups such as the Huthi movement. This is because groups that protest government corruption or injustice within states claiming to build a liberal and democratic nation-state can be deemed threats to the nation, and by extent to associated values such as freedom and equality. In the case of Yemen, the state framed the Huthis as a radical Islamic group that aimed to destroy the republic and restore the Zaidi imamate.<sup>50</sup> In an attempt to simultaneously construct a nation and consolidate power, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh demonized local, regional, religious, ethnic, and other sub-identities within state territory, as they served as threats to the hegemonic idea of the state. may interfere with citizens' loyalty to the state. Krishna explains, "The intellectual and political privileging of the nation-state and its univocal discourse of sovereignty has produced a tendency to regard each and every assertion of [sub-identity] as retrogressive, antinational, incipiently

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>50</sup> Ayman Hamidi, "Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen: Haunting Histories, Unstable Moral Spaces." *Middle Eastern Studies* 45.2 (2009): 170.

secessionist - an inferior variation on the grander theme of nationhood.”<sup>51</sup> The dichotomies that define the nation-state as rational, moral, and modern reflect upon sub-identities essentialized as irrational, intolerant, and backwards.

A state maintains legitimacy through popular loyalty, and mobilizes it through nationalism. As the modern centralized state overpowers local institutions, nationalism must overpower regional, ethnic, religious, and other affiliations.<sup>52</sup> Thus, these subgroups are politicized under the nation-state. Derrida’s logic of *différance* explains this phenomenon. As one cannot define oneself without the presence of the “Other,” Krishna argues that a further political sub-identity is created in opposition to the inherently political national identity. These smaller identifications become violently divisive when states attempting to exercise sovereign authority over artificial borders seek to stamp out a population’s local traditions in favor of a unified culture and history.<sup>53</sup> These identifications can also be violently activated when national politicians favor one group over another, creating inequality in a space where a single group’s agency and power is very limited. Krishna explains that, “ethnicity [or other subgrouping] constitutes both the dangerous oppositional force against which the nation is sought to be constructed and something that could be cynically manipulated or utilized by political parties in their efforts to gain followings or win elections.”<sup>54</sup> As the logic of *différance* theorizes that identities constantly change in opposition to another, a sub-group’s relationship to the state and the nation changes through continuous interaction. The case of the Huthis illustrates the evolution of Zaidi identity as it intensified in opposition to the state. As the Yemeni nation-state rhetorically claimed moral virtue, progressiveness and unity, Huthi critiques of the oppressive state could be framed as “backwards” and a “national security threat” to permit state violence.<sup>55</sup>

When examining Yemen, we must also consider the pervasive “clash of civilizations” narrative that often frames Islam as an enemy of nation-statehood

<sup>51</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 59.

<sup>52</sup> See Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*; Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*.

<sup>53</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 62.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>55</sup> Hamidi, “Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen,” 171.

and an “enemy of the free world.”<sup>56</sup> The Republic of Yemen is not a secular state, but it celebrates a specific state brand of Islam that merges different Muslim doctrines to create a “tolerant” and “progressive” Islam that encourages subordination to the state.<sup>57</sup> As Krishna explains, identities are intensified and politicized when activated by the national-building project, and we will later explore how the state created sectarian tension in Yemen via its “pluralist” project.<sup>58</sup> Asad similarly offers that “Islamism’s preoccupation with state power is the result not of its commitment to nationalist ideas [in which they want to establish an Islamic state] but of the modern nation-state’s enforced claim to constitute legitimate social identities and arenas. No movement that aspires to more than mere belief or inconsequential talk in public can remain indifferent to state power in a secular world.”<sup>59</sup> As we shall see, the Huthi movement was motivated by state oppression and *khuruuj* (rebellion against tyranny), a central principle of Zaidism.<sup>60</sup> On the international level, the general Yemeni population was outraged when the United States forced the Yemeni state to cooperate with the “War on Terror.”<sup>61</sup> This intervention, coupled with the existence of Israel and the American invasion of Iraq, drove the Huthis to adopt a controversial slogan against the United States.<sup>62</sup> The Zaidi element of Huthi identity allowed them to be painted as “backward,” supporters of the return of the Zaidi imamate, and an Iranian proxy group. These essentializations merited state violence and foreign intervention against the Huthi movement.

## METHOD: THE POWER OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Krishna employs Derrida’s logic of *différance* to show how identities are politicized when activated by the nation-state, and I use this logic to examine interactions between the state, the Huthis, and other religious leaders as the Huthis moved toward militancy. Jennifer Milliken explains that discourse analysis is an effective way to examine trends and power dynamics in state-society relations and international relations for three reasons. First, discourses operate as systems

<sup>56</sup> Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Culture and Politics* (2000): 99-118.

<sup>57</sup> Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 103.

<sup>58</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 59.

<sup>59</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 200.

<sup>60</sup> Hamidi, “Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen: Haunting Histories”, 166.

<sup>61</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 133.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

of signification.<sup>63</sup> As Derrida explains, “discourses are expected to be structured largely in terms of binary oppositions...that, far from being neutral, establish a relation of power such that one element in the binary is privileged.”<sup>64</sup> For example, homogenous nationalisms inherently discriminate against difference. Second, discourses call these binaries into being as objects operate in relation to them. According to Milliken, “beyond giving language for speaking about (analyzing, classifying) phenomena, discourses make intelligible some ways of being in, and acting towards, the world, and of operationalizing a particular ‘of truth’ while excluding other possible modes of identity and action.”<sup>65</sup> As the Yemeni state had the power to define what it meant to be Yemeni, it also possessed the power to legitimize or de-legitimize citizens’ actions and beliefs. Finally, discourses must constantly reaffirm their own legitimacy as the world changes and actors attempt to subvert definitions of identity. This signals an inadequacy of hegemonic discourse that creates space for one to deconstruct the existing national regime of truth. Hence, I will employ a discursive approach to the history of the Huthi movement and the Republic of Yemen in order to deconstruct the actions and motives of both parties and locate a nuanced perspective on the origins of the civil war that began in 2015.

### **EXCLUSIONARY NARRATIVES IN THE YEMENI NATION-STATE**

Upper Yemen’s transition from a Zaidi imamate to the Yemen Arab Republic (“YAR”) in 1962 marked what Anderson and Lerner see as the country’s entrance into the modern world, as the previously isolated society joined the international state system and became a nation with a collective past, present, and future.<sup>66</sup> However, as new leaders attempted to build the ideal state for the present and future, they effaced 1,000 years of history—the history of the Zaidi imamate.<sup>67</sup> The development of the northern Yemen Arab Republic and the subsequent unified Republic of Yemen in 1990 are both tied closely to Zaidi history, as new state builders built a corrupt regime behind democratic rhetoric

<sup>63</sup> Jennifer Milliken, “The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods”, *European Journal of International Relations* 5.2 (1999): 229.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society*.

<sup>67</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 52.

and constructed a national identity in opposition to this essential element of the Huthi movement. To explore these processes, I first survey anti-Zaidi discourse after the fall of the imamate in 1962. Thereafter, I examine how President Saleh consolidated his power with international support. Upon the outbreak of the Huthi-led protest movement, Saleh would turn to their connection to Zaidism and ate to cast them as threats to democracy and progress in Yemen, thereby rationalizing anti-Huthi violence.

### *Peripheralization in the Yemen Arab Republic*

In 897, Yahya al-Husayn, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammed, traveled to the Yemeni highlands and established a Zaidi imamate to mediate tribal conflict with Sharia law.<sup>68</sup> Zaidism was a sparsely practiced form of Shi'a Islam before the imamate, but its beliefs and traditions flourished in Upper Yemen. The imamate was able to maintain peace for centuries via the moral authority of the *sadah*, the Hashemite Zaidis who prided themselves as descendants of Yahya and preserved social superiority through patrilineage.<sup>69</sup> The imamate-tribal coalition resisted foreign occupation for hundreds of years,<sup>70</sup> but isolationist policies in the 20th century left the Imamate impoverished and underdeveloped.<sup>71</sup> The low quality of life and strict social hierarchy motivated many shaykhs to rebel and establish a republic.<sup>72</sup> The revolutionaries had diverse religious beliefs, political convictions, and tribal alliances, but they united under dreams of an open and “modern” Yemeni state.<sup>73</sup>

The North Yemen Civil War, also known as the September 26 Revolution, was a major event in the history of the Huthi movement. Upon the establishment of the YAR, the newly created state demonized the Zaidi imamate and gradually excluded the entire Zaidi community from the public sphere.<sup>74</sup> Discourses in the newfound YAR produced categories and practices of inclusion and exclusion as the

<sup>68</sup> Gabriele Vom Bruck, *Islam Memory and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition*. (New York: Springer, 2005), 10.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> The Ottomans attempted to occupy the region from 1517-1636 and 1849-1872, but fierce local resistance prevented total control.

<sup>71</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 45.

<sup>72</sup> Tribal representatives with little political authority in the imamate.

<sup>73</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 49.

<sup>74</sup> Bruck, *Islam, Memory and Morality in Yemen*, 60.

Zaidi elites were attacked after the revolution. In addition, state patronage in the YAR created an uneven balance of power and development in Northern Yemen, setting the foundation for the Huthi's political and economic grievances.

Revolutionary leaders gained popular support by positioning their cause against the *sadah*, the Zaidi aristocracy. A popular republican chant expresses this sentiment: “*Thousands of greetings to you, oh the republic/We redeem you with skulls and blood/Today we join you, willing to sacrifice. We bring/ down the sayyid from the zenith of the sky.*”<sup>75</sup> It is no surprise that the *sadah* were portrayed as the villains of the revolution. They were not considered Yemeni because they were immigrants who claimed to be descendants of the Prophet. Furthermore, many self-righteous *sadah* lived lavishly while ruling the poor majority.<sup>76</sup> However, some *sadah*, such as Badr al-Din al-Huthi, were not elitist and many supported the revolution. Unfortunately for the revolutionary *sadah*, all *sadah* “were identified with reactionary backwardness, sometimes despised in a fashion akin to the French Republican aversion to aristocracy and royalty” after the revolution.<sup>77</sup> The new leaders of the YAR built a national consciousness in opposition to the *sadah*. Yemenis were told that they had arrived at a decisive moment in their history as a nation-state. The new leaders were painted as “Republican Heroes” who had liberated the captives of an oppressive and archaic regime, while the nation was depicted as on the cusp of a grand modernization project. The *sadah*, on the other hand, symbolized backwardness, and as immigrants, they had no place in the Yemeni nation-state.

While *sadah* lost respect due to their place in the old regime, the “Republican Heroes” built a state on cults of personality and patronage. Marieke Brandt explains, “domestic politics in Sa’da became a ‘big man game’ and the heroic exploits and revolutionary glories of those shaykhs who had supported the Republic became central to their tribal and political [prestige] and [weight].”<sup>78</sup> The young and weak state relied on shaykh loyalties to exercise control over tribes. As a result, tribal rivalries formerly transcended by revolution re-emerged, and state patronage simultaneously moderated and exacerbated tensions. This

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen*, 62.

<sup>76</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 52.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 50.



system perpetuated a fragmented state and exclusively benefitted shaykhs. Some regions were excluded from state resources because they supported the imamate during the Revolution, such as Sa'da, the home of the Huthis.<sup>79</sup>

Ali Abdullah Saleh stood at the center of this system. He became president of the YAR in 1977, and president of the Republic of Yemen in 1990. Saleh ruled Yemen until his ousting in 2012 and maintained his power by “dancing on the heads of snakes,” aligning with powerful elites while using a “divide-and-rule” strategy to keep opposition weak.<sup>80</sup> In the YAR, Saleh banned political parties and established the General People’s Congress (GPC), a political umbrella that incorporated competing political factions to establish a legitimate patronage system. The GPC “was comprised of a vast number of diverse elites that had supported the regime and formalized the existing system of patronage that was available to politically relevant supporters of Saleh’s rule.”<sup>81</sup> The unified “democratic” Republic’s constitution allowed free development of political parties, but Saleh’s GPC dominated parliament.<sup>82</sup>

It is important to note that Saleh himself was Zaidi, revealing that future Huthi dissent was not exclusively driven by Zaidi marginalization.<sup>83</sup> The Huthi movement originated in the Sa'da region, which is located on the Saudi border and served as the former capital of the Zaidi imamate. This region suffered extreme political and economic peripheralization in the Yemen Arab Republic and the subsequent unified Republic of Yemen due to Saleh’s nepotism.<sup>84</sup> Anti-Zaidi narratives, poverty in Sa'da, and state corruption contributed to the rise of the Huthi movement.

### *One Nation Under the General People’s Congress*

In 1990, North and South Yemen united as the Republic of Yemen, a participatory parliamentary democracy, after being separated for over a century by a British colonial border. Dreams of a united Yemen enchanted many Yemenis, but actual unification was driven by both the southern leader, Ali Salem al Beidh’s

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective.*, 40.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>83</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 10.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 55.

desire to stay in power, and by Saleh's ambition to expand his own.<sup>85</sup> As tension mounted between the two leaders, Saleh took control and re-established the YAR's corrupt patronage system through his party, the General People's Congress. Saleh's fraudulent elections and one dimensional national historical narrative illustrate the phenomena of postcolonial anxiety as he manipulated democracy to build his ideal nation-state, and discredited 1,000 years of Zaidi rule in Yemen to reinforce the legitimacy of his new regime.

Following the establishment of the Republic of Yemen, political efforts to create a homogenous nation marginalized many sub-identities and resulted in divisive identity politics that damaged the feasibility of a unified Yemen. In her book, *Yemen's Democracy in Regional Perspective*, Sarah Phillips observes that while leaders unified for political survival in spite of initial public commitments to democracy, "the atmosphere of intense distrust between leaders in which unification was conducted ultimately meant that... intense inter-party rivalry undermined tolerance and cooperation. It served to strengthen regional, tribal, and sectarian identities in both the leaders and in the population."<sup>86</sup> The 1990 Constitution set up a democracy based on freedom and equal representation for all, but in the following years, tensions mounted between northern interests, represented by Saleh's General People's Congress ("GPC"), and the southern Yemen Socialist Party, culminating in civil war.<sup>87</sup> The GPC won the war and reformed the Constitution to expand the chief executive's power and limit the power of the representative legislative body. All the while, Saleh demanded international aid to support the "transitional democracy."<sup>88</sup> The GPC dominated parliamentary elections in 1997 and 2003, and Saleh commented on his commitment to democracy: "We want all political powers under the parliament's dome. We want all parties to have a chance, and we don't want a 99.9% majority."<sup>89</sup> However, Saleh overtly manipulated the 1999 presidential

<sup>85</sup> Wedeen notes, "the concept of national unity did not cause unification to happen, but it did help the structure official as well as informal ideas about the political future" (55).

<sup>86</sup> Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective*, 48.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>88</sup> Prime minister Abd al-Kareem al-Iryani said at the 1999 Conference for Emerging Democracy that Yemen required financial support to "ensure the continuation of democracy" (quoted in Phillips, 49).

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective*, 60.

elections, intending to prove the strength of the state over the majority despite the presence of democratic institutions.<sup>90</sup>

The GPC's dominance in an allegedly democratic system illustrates the logic of *différance* in postcolonial state building. As Saleh's regime received foreign aid for a transitional democracy, fraudulent elections demonstrated a commitment to consolidating power at all costs. The Yemeni people were not ready to dictate the state-building process "for the time being," and Saleh constantly manipulated democracy through his divide-and-rule strategy with state elites.<sup>91</sup> Saleh's regime maintained power with sub-group tension and conflict that only the state could mediate.<sup>92</sup> As Phillips explains, "solutions to problems are created through the dispersal of resources, benefits, and status, and the way to attract these is, therefore, to create a crisis and negotiate a solution with the leadership."<sup>93</sup> This system left state and society weak and divided. Many Yemenis struggled to organize against the corrupt state in a fragmented civil society, but many also preferred to live under Saleh rather than in a violent power vacuum.<sup>94</sup> The state capitalized on these fears and demonized opposition groups that were outside the circle of patronage.

Krishna's idea of postcolonial anxiety, which refers to the state builders' desire to "catch up" to powerful Western states, is evident in Saleh's authoritarian tendencies, as well the GPC's attempt to construct a national narrative. Nationalism functions to emotionally legitimize state authority, and regime displays of the Yemeni "nation-state" aimed to mobilize citizens' devotion to the state over sub-identities. In a study of primary and secondary Yemeni social studies textbooks published between 2000 and 2004, Elizabeth Young observes that the books directly address the student and paint a primordial story of Yemen's inherent unity.<sup>95</sup> <sup>96</sup> The curriculum focuses on Yemen's ancient history and proudly delineates strong ancient empires within state borders, naturalizing territorial claims. 1,000 years of Zaidi rule is

<sup>90</sup> Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 74.

<sup>91</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 18.

<sup>92</sup> Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective*, 5.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>95</sup> The texts include phrases such as "dear student," "your ancestors," and "your country" (Young 2010, 27).

<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Young, "Writing the Past: An Examination of History and National Narratives in the Republic of Yemen's Textbooks," in *Legitimation and Stability of Political Systems: The Contribution of National Narratives*, ed. Ingo Richter, (Tilberg, NL: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2010.)

ignored and general facts about the two Yemens are glossed over. The Imamate and the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen are mentioned only in relation to the revolution and "blessed unification" of 1990, and Yemen's division is said to have resulted in "injustice, tyranny, backwardness...[and] seclusion," as well as colonialism.<sup>97</sup> Many national narratives employ historical inaccuracies to construct a past which serves a specific vision of the future, and Saleh attempted to erase and demonize memories of the two Yemens in order to secure future power.<sup>98</sup> Parties that challenged this narrative, such as southern separatists and the Zaidi cultural revivalists, publicly became "traitors" to the nation.<sup>99</sup>

In sum, the Yemen Arab Republic followed the hegemonic nation-state model and produced new conceptions of Yemeni identity, which carried into the unified Republic of Yemen. State builders constructed a national identity in opposition to Zaidism as an "Other" connected with the former Imamate. This signals postcolonial anxiety as the state attacked the former regime in order to legitimize its own power for the present and future. The state also sought to legitimize its governance through democratic pretenses, while Saleh compromised elections and kept opposition weak to maintain power. Furthermore, state corruption perpetuated poverty across Yemen, especially in the Sa'da province, the birthplace of the Huthis. However, Huthi grievances were not driven exclusively by state marginalization. These conditions, as well as Wahhabi attacks on Zaidism, would soon spark civil protests. Wahhabi attacks on Zaidism contributed to the Zaidi cultural revival, which promoted Zaidi national representation, combatted Wahhabi anti-Zaidi propaganda, and criticized the Saudi neo-imperialism implicated in the rise of Wahhabism. Revivalist themes would heavily influence the Huthi platform.

## THE "SUNNIZATION" OF UPPER YEMEN

Alongside the political developments described above, Zaidi culture and religion were gradually marginalized as Wahhabi religious leaders exploited the fall of the Imamate for proselytism and dispensed anti-Zaidi propaganda. Similar to the state's propaganda, Wahhabi missionaries mobilized exclusionary binaries

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

to pain Zaidism as backward and irrational. The tension between Wahhabism and Zaidism contributed to the rise of the Huthi movement as Zaidi identity was continually politicized and threatened. Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Wahhabism, played a large role in this shift and manipulating Yemeni society to its advantage by leveraging regional hegemony. In this way, local Wahhabbi-Zaidi tensions took on an international character that heavily influenced Huthi opposition to foreign activity in Yemen. Wahhabism is integral to the story of the Huthis, as the Zaidi cultural revival emanated from Wahhabi attacks on Zaidi tradition, thereby illustrating how identity is intensified under threat from external forces. The Zaidi cultural revival, which promoted Zaidi national representation, combatted Wahhabi anti-Zaidi propaganda, and criticized the Saudi neo-imperialism implicated in the rise of Wahhabism. Revivalist themes would heavily influence the Huthi platform.

In order to provide a framework of analysis, I explore how various religious sects interacted to create the late 20th century landscape in Upper Yemen. I then examine Wahhabism's role in Saudi foreign policy and how Wahhabism's increase in the YAR and unified Republic may be connected to a greater Saudi political project. Following the Imamate's fall, Wahhabis defined themselves as "modern" in opposition to "backward" Zaidis to gain cultural influence in the new states. Anti-Zaidi attacks and lack of state protection catalyzed a defensive Zaidi cultural revival, in which Zaidis spoke against defamation and suspected Saudi influence in Yemeni politics. The Upper Yemen Zaidi-Wahhabi feud contextualizes the role of religion in the Huthi rebellion and Saudi interest in the conflict.

### *Islam in Yemen*

Most Yemenis follow one of two major sects of Islam. Roughly 25-45% of Yemen's Muslim population is Zaidi Shi'a, while the rest are Shafi'i Sunni.<sup>100</sup> Shaif'is primarily live in southern and central Yemen, while Zaidis are concentrated in Upper Yemen. The Sa'da province, home of the regional capital, Sa'da, as well as the al-Huthi family, is one of the most predominantly Zaidi regions, as it was the capital of the former Imamate. Zaidism, a moderate Shi'a sect, is considered more similar to Sunni doctrines than to other Shi'a doctrines.<sup>101</sup> Few differences exist between Zaidi and Shafi'i doctrine, apart from the Zaidi belief in an imam

<sup>100</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 5.

<sup>101</sup> Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective*, 41.

and in the *sadab's* patrilineal authority.<sup>102</sup> In the context of modern Yemeni politics, the Sunni Islah party honored the new state's legitimacy while the Zaidi leaders felt compelled to protest perceived injustice and corruption.<sup>103</sup> This is because Zaidis believe in the principle of *khuruj*, or rebellion against tyranny.<sup>104</sup> Zayd ibn Ali, the father of Zaidism, was martyred while fighting against the Umayyad caliphate and from this history, the principle of "commanding right and forbidding wrong" became central to Zaidi belief.<sup>105</sup> For this reason, it was convenient for Yemeni authorities to favor other Islamic leaders and sects that discourage rebellion.

Leaders in the YAR merged Zaidi and Sunni principles in an effort to "create the Republic as an enduring ideological form" via "a 'unified' Islam based primarily on the Quran and the Sunna."<sup>106</sup> However, they privileged Sunni reforms.<sup>107</sup> As a result, the public convergence of Zaidi and Sunni doctrines threatened people's sense of piety and divided Muslims, creating a new form of sectarianism. Further, Wahhabism gained traction after the Zaidi imamate's fall and actively campaigned against Zaidism, intensifying both parties' sense of self as tensions publicly rose between Zaidis and Wahhabis. These developments illustrate Asad's and Krishna's theories that identities are not static and do not fundamentally resent other entities that clash with their views; rather, they are only politically activated when threatened.

### *Wahhabism and Saudi Regional Hegemony*

A specific Sunni branch, Wahhabism gradually gained influence in Upper Yemen due to the region's proximity to Saudi Arabia, a predominantly Wahhabi state. The rise of Wahhabism in Upper Yemen is connected to a greater Saudi political project in the Muslim world dating back to an 18<sup>th</sup> century agreement between the House of Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism.<sup>108</sup> Wahhabism resituates Saudi Arabia at the center of the Muslim

<sup>102</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 102.

<sup>103</sup> Hamidi, "Inscriptions of violence in Northern Yemen: haunting histories", 166.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 103.

<sup>107</sup> Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 169.

<sup>108</sup> Michael Cook, "On the Origins of Wahhābism." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2.2

world as it promotes a fundamentalist approach to Islam that elevates the status of Saudi Arabia as the homeland of Muhammad. Saudi Arabia aims to establish what we could call religio-political hegemony through international Wahhabism as well as regional exercises of hard power.

When Saudi oil exports increased in the late 20th century, Wahhabism exploded onto the world stage. Oil funds allowed Wahhabis to open hospitals, schools, and other institutions around the world that portray Wahhabism as “the modern Islam.”<sup>109</sup> The US State Department estimates that the Saudi aristocracy has invested at least \$10 billion in Wahhabi charities around the world in an attempt to subvert all other forms of Islam.<sup>110</sup> Wahhabism as a pervasive, tech-savvy “modern Islam” is one of many projections of Saudi regional hegemony; Krishna connects these projections to postcolonial anxiety, as he argues that strong states feel compelled to demonstrate their power on the world stage and fill the void left by colonizers during their era of regional domination.<sup>111</sup>

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia exercises regional hegemony by breaking economic ties with states that dissent from Saudi foreign policy. For example, when Yemen initially advocated for an exclusively Arab response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, contradicting the Saudi pro-American view, Saudi Arabia exercised its regional power and deported thousands of Upper Yemeni workers, which impoverished many northern Yemenis who relied on remittances.<sup>112</sup> Saleh never contradicted Saudi Arabia again.

### *The Rise of Wahhabism in Upper Yemen*

Wahhabism in Yemen increased dramatically after the fall of the imamate as Saudi Arabia attempted to advance cultural influence across the border. Before 1962, Yemeni Wahhabi converts were largely migrants working in Saudi Arabia. These men, often at the bottom of society, were drawn to the Wahhabi message of “a direct, unmediated relationship to God and [the valorization of fraternal,

(1992): 195.

<sup>109</sup> Harry Philby, John Bridger, William Ochsenwald, “Saudi Arabia: The Wahhabi Movement”, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, last modified December 18, 2018.

<sup>110</sup> “What Is Wahhabism? The Reactionary Branch of Islam from Saudi Arabia Said to Be ‘the Main Source of Global Terrorism’”, *The Telegraph*. March 29, 2016.

<sup>111</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 22.

<sup>112</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 80.

egalitarian bonds among male coreligionists.”<sup>113</sup> In the YAR, Wahhabis became more visible and built mosques and schools. The leading Wahhabis were Yemeni, but their campaigns and projects relied on Saudi funding. The 1962 revolution upended a Zaidi-dominated society, but it was the rise of Wahhabi organizations, especially in the Sa'da province, that intensified the Zaidi cultural crisis as they deliberately attacked Zaidism's religious legitimacy and social relevance in the new republic. Anti-Zaidi propaganda utilized state rhetoric on Zaidi backwardness to promote Wahhabism as both a more pious and more modern Islam.

A major element of Wahhabist propaganda was delegitimizing Zaidism and proclaiming Wahhabism as the only “true Islam.” As Daniel Brown explains, “The guiding principle of Salafi reformism was the conviction that Muslims must emulate the first generation of Muslims... and recapture the pure Islam of the Prophet...It is in cutting through the interpretive accretions that classical scholarship has built up around these basic texts that the salafiyya set themselves apart.”<sup>114</sup> Wahhabism rejects traditional Quranic schools of thought and advocates for a fundamentalist interpretation. Therefore, different branches of Quran and Hadith interpretation, such as the Zaidi *madhab*, are deemed heretical. Wahhabism grew rapidly post-1962 as a way for Yemenis to defame the Zaidi elite and project moral superiority. Wahhabi leaders disseminated anti-Zaidi propaganda, which described moral abuses of the *sadah*, attacked “impious” doctrines, and stigmatized Zaidis as “unbelievers” or “heretics.”<sup>115</sup> Most notably, they spoke out against the Zaidi practice of honoring the dead, as they considered this practice “polytheistic.”<sup>116</sup> This resulted in the destruction of Zaidi tombstones in the Sa'da region and throughout Yemen. Wahhabis legitimized these actions as combating heresy.<sup>117</sup>

Simultaneously, Wahhabis performed “modernity” by establishing institutions such as schools and hospitals. The *ma'ahid 'ilmiyyah*, scientific institutes funded by the Saudi government, were established around Upper Yemen and on the border of southern Yemen in the 1970s. While they did not

<sup>113</sup> Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 165.

<sup>114</sup> Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>115</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 107.

<sup>116</sup> Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, 127.

<sup>117</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 108.



officially promote religious doctrines, most administrators and instructors were Salafi, and Shi'a were often denounced as infidels in the classroom. By 2002 the system, which ran parallel to the national school system, had 600,000 pupils.<sup>118</sup> The system was integrated into the public system after fierce demands from the Yemeni government, but an entire generation of Yemenis had already been educated in these unregulated Saudi schools.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, Wahhabi religious centers were also established in the middle of Zaidi communities with Saudi funds; this further escalated sectarian tensions, as Zaidis felt threatened by the large number of Wahhabi students.<sup>120</sup>

Wahhabis did not question the actions of the YAR leadership, as they believed in staying apolitical and honoring existing regimes.<sup>121</sup> As a result, they were never reprimanded for anti-Zaidi actions. Unchecked Wahhabi attacks on Zaidis illustrate the rancor of the anti-Zaidi campaign. As Wahhabis justified violent graveyard attacks as combating heresy, certain Zaidi groups, such as the Believing Youth, began to contemplate the use of defensive force.<sup>122</sup> Zaidis believed that Wahhabi violence was encouraged by the state, which preferentially funded Wahhabi projects and failed to protect Zaidis from Wahhabi attacks.<sup>123</sup> State support of Wahhabism led many Zaidis to suspect Saudi interference in Yemeni politics. Ultimately, this belief would inform the Huthis' anti-imperialist platform. I now turn to the Zaidi cultural revival that emerged in response to state and Wahhabi threats. The Believing Youth, the predecessor of the Huthi movement, would play a central role in this revival.

## **ZAIDI CULTURAL REVIVAL AND THE RISE OF THE HUTHIS**

In the late 20th century, Yemen's Zaidi community was experiencing an intense cultural crisis, as new state leaders and Wahhabi missionaries attempted to efface the past millennium of Zaidi rule in Yemen.<sup>124</sup> Scholar Al-Wazir argued that, "When you change the identity of twelve hundred years, what will remain?"

<sup>118</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 104.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalisms," 274.

<sup>121</sup> Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 170.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 160.

<sup>124</sup> vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen*, 220.

Nothing...You will find twelve hundred years wiped out for us.”<sup>125</sup> As Zaidis attempted to address this cultural erasure, a cultural revival emerged that produced a rich body of Zaidi scholarship and inspired citizens to re-enter the public sphere as proud Zaidis. This section examines an array of Zaidi actions to illustrate how identities are intensified and politicized when threatened. I first explore general mass movements that promoted Zaidism in the public sphere, and then survey how Zaidi scholars situated Zaidism within the modern Yemeni state. Following this, I examine the anti-Wahhabi campaigns and resulting electoral failures of the national Zaidi party, Hizb al-Haqq. The sections on the Believing Youth and Movement of the Slogan describe how these failures drove one of the founders of the Huthi movement, Husayn al-Huthi, to combat perceived corruption and injustice beyond state frameworks. The rise of the Huthis as situated in the Zaidi cultural revival reveals that group members were not inherently anti-democratic, violent, or secessionist, but were gradually driven to more radical modes of resistance as a consequence of continual state oppression.

### *Overview of the Revival*

Zaidis attempted to reclaim space in the public sphere with actions that mimicked Wahhabi strategies. Activists objected to the presence of Wahhabi schools that “failed to take account of the social fabric of the areas in which they were established,” and opened their own religious schools which also operated parallel to the national public schools.<sup>126</sup> They produced their own textbooks and elevated cultural heroes who embodied *khuruj*,<sup>127</sup> such as Ibn Hariwa, who was killed for protesting the 18th century Sunni reforms within the Zaidi madhab.<sup>128</sup> To mobilize the Zaidi community, bookstores sold literature in direct opposition to state and Salafi narratives, and preachers used audio cassettes to spread Zaidi messages. Zaidi masses congregated against Wahhabis in contested mosques and responded to the Wahhabi proclamation of *amin*<sup>129</sup> with *kathabin* (liar).<sup>130</sup> Zaidis

<sup>125</sup> Quoted in King, “Zaydi Revival in a Hostile Republic”, 432.

<sup>126</sup> vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen*, 240.

<sup>127</sup> Rebellion against tyranny.

<sup>128</sup> Andrew Dumm, *Understanding the Houthi Conflict in Northern Yemen: A Social Movement Approach* (Washington DC: American University Press, 2010), 89.

<sup>129</sup> A phrase to close a prayer, similar to the Christian “amen.”

<sup>130</sup> Dumm, *Understanding the Houthi Conflict in Northern Yemen*, 90.

also revived public celebrations of religious holidays that had ceased after the fall of the imamate. Many Zaidis resisted marginalization in these peaceful ways.

In her book, *Peripheral Visions*, Lisa Wedeen argues that Anderson's concept of nationalism—in which an imagined community moves through linear, uniform time, occupies the same historical territory, and replaces theological imaginings with secular national loyalties—does not fit the conceptualization of Yemeni identity.<sup>131</sup> She argues that Yemen's complex history produces tribal, regional, religious, occupational, and familial loyalties within an individual; as such “both official and unofficial declarations of Yemeni authenticity function ambiguously and simultaneously with local and transnational experiences of identification.”<sup>132</sup> Wedeen uses the case of Yemen to illustrate “heterogeneous forms of collective imagining” that can be both non-secular and nationalist.<sup>133134</sup> Zaidi scholars in the revival attempted to articulate these nuances to prove that Zaidism was not a national threat.

These scholars connected Zaidi culture to republican values. One scholar reasoned that the imamate guarded Yemen's identity as it resisted foreign domination for over 1,000 years.<sup>135136</sup> Others argued that Zaidism is progressive, as many Zaidis supported the 1962 revolution. As Abd al-Karim Gadban claims, “were it not for the Zaidi theory of *khuruj* against the oppressor, the Revolution would not have happened.”<sup>137</sup> He also argues that *khuruj* was the Yemeni predecessor of free speech and elections:

If the Constitution guarantees me that I can express my opinion and topple the ruler through constitutional methods -- by way of elections and the ballot box -- then the result is the [desired] change. Zaidism

<sup>131</sup> Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 4.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> And these identities are “frequently mobilized politically to support or combat with the state's claims to their allegiances, as well as to combat perceived threats.” King, “Zaydī Revival in a Hostile Republic,” 417.

<sup>134</sup> Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 11.

<sup>135</sup> In this context, Yemeni identity refers to Wedeen's nuanced definition of Yemeni-ness, as the imamate protected all tribes and denominations within its territory against foreign invaders. The imamate also did not force all people into Zaidism, as multiple religious communities existed and Sunni thought was integrated into the Zaidi madhab.

<sup>136</sup> King, “Zaydī Revival in a Hostile Republic,” 431.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in King, “Zaydī Revival in a Hostile Republic,” 428.

seeks better rule, so if you arrive at this goal through peaceful change and constitutional khuruj, this is better. Fighting and bloodshed are resorted to only in emergency situations when the other paths are blocked.<sup>138</sup>

Though mainstream state and Wahhabi discourses fit Zaidi identity into rigid categories, these approaches to Zaidism attempt to transcend dichotomies of traditional/modern and local/national. These discussions related Zaidism to republican ideals, stressed the importance of honoring Zaidi legacies in Yemeni nation-state building, and emphasized the long-standing complexity of identity in Yemen.<sup>139</sup>

### *The Hizb al-Haqq Party*

The al-Haqq party was founded by Zaidi activists in the midst of this cultural and political revival in 1990. The party attacked the state by critiquing injustice, Saudi imperialism, and the state's culpability in Zaidi attacks. Ahmad al-Shami, the general secretary, explains al-Haqq's greatest struggle: "Wahhabism is a child of imperialism and is its spearhead in our country. Both are one and the same thing. How do we stand up to an enemy we don't see? We are seeing imperialism in our country in its Islamic guise. In reality, we are fighting something which is more dangerous than imperialism: its legitimate son."<sup>140</sup> This statement reverses state discourses that equated British colonialism with the tyranny of the Zaidi imamate.<sup>141</sup> By rejecting the framing of Zaidism as a threat to the republic, the party attempted to counter and supplant the state's narrative.

Unfortunately, due to Saleh's election manipulation, al-Haqq could not compete with the Saleh's party, the GPC. In the 1993 elections, the GPC won 123 seats, the al-Islah, a Sunni party, won 62, and al-Haqq won 2 seats.<sup>142</sup> Al-Haqq won no seats in the 1997 election. The failure of al-Haqq within the

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> King, "Zaydi Revival in a Hostile Republic," 420.

<sup>140</sup> Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, 227.

<sup>141</sup> During Eid al-Adha 2010, "the festival of sacrifice," Yemeni secretary of defense honored martyrs who died "liberating our people from the bygone system of the clerical and racist imamate and the loathsome colonialism." King, "Zaydi Revival in a Hostile Republic," 420.

<sup>142</sup> Dumm, *Understanding the Houthi Conflict in Northern Yemen*, 95.

electoral system demonstrated that their goals could not be realized through civil means of resistance. As a result, many left the party, including one of the future founders of the Huthi movement, Husayn al-Huthi.<sup>143</sup> Al-Huthi began his career as a moderate politician in al-Haqq and advocated free and fair elections as the best form of *khuruj* in contemporary politics. He won one of the two al-Haqq parliament seats in 1993, and witnessed rampant corruption within the Saleh regime.<sup>144</sup> As he began to aggressively speak out against the corruption, he came into conflict with other al-Haqq members who wanted more Zaidi representation in mainstream politics.<sup>145</sup>

Al-Haqq's political defeats pushed the rise and radicalization of the Believing Youth, for the party's failure "reinforced more hardline elements that were already gaining traction within rivalism."<sup>146</sup> The failure of al-Haqq is connected to the Huthis' rise, as al-Huthi sought to seek justice for Zaidis beyond Saleh's state by politically mobilizing members of the Believing Youth organization against state oppression and neo-imperialism.

### *The Believing Youth*

The Believing Youth began in the early 1990s as a six-member organization within the Zaidi revival.<sup>147</sup> The group was devoted to cultural studies and publications, and established rural summer schools for boys on Zaidi jurisprudence and theology.<sup>148</sup> While the movement was successful in grassroots religious revival and social activism, divergent opinions on state-Zaidi relations caused a schism between political and apolitical Believing Youth leaders, leading Husayn al-Huthi to leave the group in 2001.

In an interview, a leader of the Believing Youth, Mohammad Ezzan, said the schools aimed to "fill the void" experienced by youth in the impoverished Sa'da region.<sup>149</sup> Once the center of the Zaidi imamate, the region was largely ignored by the Yemeni state.<sup>150</sup> Limited natural resources and underdevelopment

<sup>143</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 110.

<sup>144</sup> Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective*, 40.

<sup>145</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 125.

<sup>146</sup> Dumm, *Understanding the Houthi Conflict in Northern Yemen*, 96.

<sup>147</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 117.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

led to widespread poverty in the region.<sup>151</sup> As Wahhabis gained influence in Sa'da, the region became the center of the Zaidi cultural revival. The Believing Youth worked to provide educational and social support to impoverished youth, in part to prevent young Zaidis from attending Salafi schools. Ezzan explained the curriculum was devoted to “tolerance, rejecting fanaticism and extremism, and instead promoting ‘moderation and balance’” to help youth find peace and joy in their lives.<sup>152</sup> By 1994, the movement was working with 15,000 students.<sup>153</sup>

Husayn al-Huthi became an active leader of the Believing Youth following al-Haqq's failure. Al-Huthi's time in parliament showed him that Zaidi political representation and economic development in marginalized regions could not be attained through civic protests and elections under a corrupt regime.<sup>154</sup> Like Ezzan, he saw the Believing Youth as a way to “fill the void” in impoverished regions, but he also wanted to expand their infrastructure for local governance and development projects.<sup>155</sup> However, the Believing Youth fragmented in 2001, as some wished to keep the organization apolitical and avoid government critiques, while those led by al-Huthi sought to mobilize politically.<sup>156</sup>

The Believing Youth schism illustrates how the Zaidi cultural revival both emerged from and perpetuated narratives of “self/other” as the Zaidi community attempted to define itself in a society where it fell from leaders to outsiders. Wedeen explains the evolution of the revival: “organizations devoted to mobilizing protagonists on the basis of [Zaidi/Wahhabi classifications] have evolved over time, responding to particular events, such as specific tomb desecrations or the death of key spiritual leaders, and to the changing calculations and fortunes of political actors in their associations with the Saleh regime.”<sup>157</sup> After witnessing al-Haqq's political failure and state corruption, al-Huthi pursued justice on his own terms. Politicizing the Zaidi religion intensified al-Huthi's sense of self and the injustice inflicted upon Zaidis, thereby legitimizing resistance methods that subverted state power.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>152</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>157</sup> Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 167.

*The Movement of the Slogan*

The Believing Youth fragment that followed al-Huthi took on an international character, as it connected local underdevelopment and national tyranny with the activities of Western powers in the Middle East. Al-Huthi's group became known as the "Movement of the Slogan" because it gained popularity with the slogan: "God is Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Kill all Jews, Victory to Islam!" In response to continuous state oppression and foreign activity in Yemen, the Huthis subverted dominant state discourse on freedom in Yemen by exercising their freedom of expression with this slogan. They gained support from Yemenis across the country, illustrating the power of words and their ability to organize the masses against systemic injustice.<sup>158</sup>

Husayn was said to have developed this slogan during the second Intifada in Palestine in September 2000 when he watched a video of a Palestinian boy die in his father's arms when caught between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian insurgents. At first glance, the slogan reinforces Western conceptions of Islamism that paint Muslims as irrational enemies of freedom and democracy.<sup>159</sup> However, the logic of *différance* demystifies the slogan. It is undergirded by grievances addressing domestic corruption and Western aid to the Saleh regime and further objects to perceived Western imperialism in the Middle East. As Khaled Fattah argues, "slogans are headlines crowded with meaning. The more correctly the slogan expresses the dissatisfaction and suffering of the people, the more effective it will be in mobilizing latent emotions."<sup>160</sup> The slogan became increasingly popular after the September 11th attacks, as the United States pressured Saleh to cooperate with its "War on Terror" and allow counter-terrorist operations in Yemen.<sup>161</sup> Yemenis were outraged by Saleh's concessions as they witnessed American violence against Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, and as they watched the United States detain Yemenis in Guantanamo Bay.<sup>162</sup>

With the rise of al-Huthi and his movement, many Yemenis recognized that a leader who was able to successfully articulate the grievances of the population

<sup>158</sup> Khaled Fattah, "Yemen: A Slogan and Six Wars," Conflicts Forum RSS, October 28, 2006, <http://www.conflictsforum.org/2009/yemen-a-slogan-and-six-wars/>.

<sup>159</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

<sup>160</sup> Fattah, "Yemen: A Slogan and Six Wars."

<sup>161</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 133.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

had emerged in Yemen. Wedeen articulates how a slogan could mobilize the masses and form the Movement of the Slogan: “Language and everyday habits and rituals help secure the commitments of would-be and actual adherents. The overt politicization of a practice, which may or may not be deliberately strategic, has in any case the effect of fixing or intensifying the importance of that practice.”<sup>163</sup> Al-Huthi’s radical slogan represented how interactions between Zaidi leaders, the state, the greater Yemeni people, and the international community produced widespread indignation. It gave a voice to all Yemenis, not just Zaidis. Accordingly, al-Huthi maintained that it was an exercise of freedom of expression, for the slogan worked to “provoke the authorities rather than incite violence.”<sup>164</sup>

Al-Huthi attracted many followers with the slogan, and retained this strong following with powerful speeches that criticized corruption, injustice, and neo-imperialism. In his lecture notes, the *Malazim*, he criticized Saleh’s promises as “idle talk”, writing, “in the end...not a single promise has been kept as Ali Abdullah Saleh said when he visited [the region of Sa'da]: ‘God willing, in 1986 Sa'da will be on a single power grid’; then came 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, and 1991 and nothing happened—we remained applying for electricity for seven years for a single region.”<sup>165</sup> To this day, most communities in Sa'da continue to lack electricity.<sup>166</sup>

Husayn also elaborated on his motivation for the slogan and denounced American influence in Yemen. The following quote provides the other side of the “clash of civilizations” narrative:

Notice that when people go out with these slogans, which appear to be an easy task, it irritates them [i.e., the Americans] greatly because it is religious work in the path of Allah. The American ambassador said his country ‘does not want enemies among the Arab people to be transformed into religious enemies.’ What are religious enemies? What he is saying is that they don’t want you to be transformed in your confrontation with us under the rubric of ‘in the path of Allah’

<sup>163</sup> Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 169.

<sup>164</sup> Hamidi, “Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen,” 175.

<sup>165</sup> Quoted in Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 137.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.



because they know that they will be defeated in the end if this is the case. So, instead, they suggest that you work according to different themes, such as ‘fighting for the sake of the nation,’ or ‘defending the nation,’ or similar expressions...these expressions are nowhere to be found in the Quran...Muslims are in a state of perpetual confrontation, in general, they are acting ‘in the path of Allah’ and they know that no other mottos can ever liberate their nations unless they go out ‘in the path of Allah’... during [the entire period of colonialism and neocolonialism] people have never been liberated from the occupier because they have not raised up this important slogan and have not oriented their confrontation ‘in the path of Allah.’<sup>167</sup>

In this quote, al-Huthi directly confronts nationalism in Yemen, which he views as a tool to subordinate Yemenis to Western ideologies rather than local religious ideology. “Fighting for the sake of the nation” seems no different than “fighting for Allah,” yet jihadis are demonized in hegemonic Western discourse. Violence in the name of freedom and civilization is seen as a virtuous act. Asad calls this the liberal myth:

Violence required by the cultivation of enlightenment is therefore distinguished from the violence of [illiberal regimes]. The former is to be seen as an expression of law, the latter of transgression... Liberalism is not merely the passion of civility... It claims the right to exercise power, though the threat and the use of violence, when it redeems the world and punishes the recalcitrant.<sup>168</sup>

For Zaidis, the principle of *khuruj* merits violence if justice cannot be served in any other way.

Unfortunately, the Zaidi cultural revival could not counteract the predominant anti-Zaidi narratives perpetuated by the state and Wahhabi movement, nor the poverty perpetuated by government marginalization. Al-Huthi initially favored *khuruj* exercised through free and fair elections, but his

<sup>167</sup> Quoted in Lux, “Yemen’s last Zaydī Imām,” 391.

<sup>168</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 60.

time in parliament showed him that change was unattainable within the state framework.<sup>169</sup> Accordingly, he concluded that action through civil society was the only way to improve the quality of life in Northern Yemen.<sup>170</sup>

While al-Huthi's platform supported democracy and critiqued state hypocrisy, his message's foundation in Zaidism inspired the state to frame the Huthis as a group committed to re-establishing a racist and primitive Zaidi imamate. This discourse was possible because the Yemeni state defined itself as a modern liberal state committed to the interests of the nation. The Huthi movement, based in Zaidi beliefs and located in the isolated highlands of northern Yemen, could be conceived of as an irrational and retrogressive force against the liberal nation-state's claim to morality, rationality, and modernity. As we will see, this discourse merited state violence, intensified sectarian divides, and allowed Saudi Arabia to intervene as a hegemon dedicated to "regional stability."

### **RATIONALIZING VIOLENCE: THE SA'DA WARS**

From 1962 to 2004, Yemen's northern Sa'da region was largely ignored by the federal government due to its history as the capital of the Zaidi imamate, and Zaidism became vulnerable to Wahabbi attacks advanced by Saudi political interests. The Zaidi community in Sa'da and beyond had engaged in various forms of civil disobedience in the Zaidi cultural revival, but continuous state neglect and corruption had pushed al-Huthi and his movement towards a larger political project that connected local poverty to national injustice and neo-imperialism. The Huthi movement gave voice to a population that wished for true sovereignty beyond Saleh's unjust rule; this would push the state to take violent action against the Huthis' civil disobedience. The state invaded the Huthi base in 2004, marking the beginning of the Sa'da Wars and the Huthis' rebirth as a militant faction.<sup>171</sup> This section will begin with the events and discourses that led to state violence and proceed to explore how state narratives during the Sa'da Wars framed the Huthis as an Iranian proxy dedicated to restoring the fallen imamate. This rhetoric resulted in Saudi and American interest in combating the Huthis, and mobilized other parties within Yemen against the group. Unfortunately, the

<sup>169</sup> Hamidi, "Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen," 170.

<sup>170</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 130.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

complex web of competing interests would eventually lead to Saleh's downfall and a nationwide war.

### *State Recourse to Violence*

The Movement of the Slogan, also known as the Huthi movement, did not attract much government attention until January 2003, when President Saleh visited Sa'da and was greeted by a large crowd chanting "God is Greatest, death to America, death to Israel, kill all Jews, victory to Islam" to protest the regime.<sup>172</sup> The American ambassador was welcomed in the same manner later that year, and ordered the Yemen state to address the unrest in Sa'da.<sup>173</sup> The state carried out mass arrests, cut salaries of Huthi civil servants, expelled students from school and shut down entire schools.<sup>174</sup> These actions only fueled the movement's anti-Americanism as the Huthis—claiming their right to freedom of expression in a democratic state—refused to stop chanting.<sup>175</sup> This statement illustrates how the Huthis inverted the state's democratic rhetoric.

In 2004, Saleh summoned al-Huthi to the capital. Al-Huthi refused, writing in a letter, "I do not work against you, I appreciate you and what you do tremendously, but what I do is my solemn national identity against the enemy of Islam: America and Israel. I am by your side, so do not listen to hypocrites and provocateurs, and trust that I am more sincere and honest than you are."<sup>176</sup> While al-Huthi acknowledged Saleh's leadership, he also addressed the gilded nature of the Yemeni nation-state as Saleh's corrupt and authoritarian rule operated with the use of democratic rhetoric reminiscent of Western values. Additionally, al-Huthi implicitly referenced Saudi influence in Yemeni politics and in the perpetuation of anti-Zaidi narratives by the Wahhabi sect.<sup>177</sup>

The state issued a warrant for al-Huthi's arrest, and invaded the Huthi stronghold in Sa'da for tax evasion in June 2004.<sup>178</sup> In an interpretation of state recourse to violence as an act of postcolonial anxiety, Wedeen argues that "the central government's control over the western part of Sa'da province, never strong

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 139.

at any time, was challenged by the movement's growing dominance, and the regime felt compelled to act to preserve its wobbly authority."<sup>179</sup> The 2004 invasion commenced the first of six Sa'da Wars between the Huthis and the state.

### *State Narratives*

The government advanced a widespread anti-Zaidi campaign during the wars. The state essentialized the Huthi's Zaidi-based identity by framing them as a group that aimed to restore the "racist" imamate and worked as an Iranian proxy, in order to rationalize violence against the group.<sup>180</sup> These themes are common tropes in Orientalist discourse, that frames the East as backward and irrational, which, in turn, reflect the moral virtue and rationality of the Western world.<sup>181</sup> In his analysis of the Sri Lankan civil war, Krishna highlights mainstream discourses in postcolonial India and Sri Lanka that paint the contemporary Tamil identities as identical and inherently secessionist, thereby legitimizing stereotypes about Tamil aversion to a centralized Indian and Sri Lankan state.<sup>182</sup> This illustrates the pervasiveness of Orientalism in both the East and West, a discourse that fuels postcolonial anxiety and state leaders' potential recourse to violence. By using Orientalist images of the Huthis as extremists determined to overthrow democracy and establish an Imamate, the state was able to conjure domestic opposition groups into being and evoke fears about Islamism in the international community. By this time, the Huthis had become a militant faction in order to survive the state violence. The Huthis may not have been interested in restoring the fallen Imamate, but they mobilized against Saleh's violent regime to avoid further persecution.

Al-Thawra, a state news outlet, declared al-Huthi and his family "enemies of the revolution... and democracy," and insisted that they spread "a racist, fanatical ideology that [threatened] everyone." He also stated that "those who [did] not move with the times [would] be the subjects of derision."<sup>183</sup> Government outlets accused al-Huthi of calling himself "Imam" or "Commander

<sup>179</sup> Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 185.

<sup>180</sup> Hamidi, "Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen," 171.

<sup>181</sup> Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>182</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 61.

<sup>183</sup> Quoted in Hamidi, "Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen," 174.

of the Faithful,” and state sources published alleged lectures of al-Huthi describing the re-establishment of the Imamate as one of his main goals.<sup>184</sup> Moderate Zaidi scholars also worked with the state to paint the Huthis as enemies to the nation-state and to Islam:

What is going on in Sa‘da... is a great danger threatening the existence and unity of the nation, and its stability, given what it has in terms of shedding of blood... the bringing to life of ignorant clannish fanaticism [‘asabiya jahiliya], and taking the nation [umma] back to fragmentation and perforation... There is no doubt that what is going on in Sa‘da is an armed revolt [tamarrud]... against the state, exceeding all fixed religious and national bounds.<sup>185</sup>

The imagery of blood and “clannish fanaticism” is especially poignant in this statement and paints the Huthis as barbaric insurgents.

State propaganda further demonized the Huthis’ Shi’a identity by framing them as Iranian proxies. At the beginning of the first war, an Interior Ministry spokesman stated that “investigations” had exposed “many details about the support that these rebels against the constitution and the law [received] from regional entities, either through intelligence agencies in some countries, or through faith or sect-based groups, or from welfare societies in the region.”<sup>186</sup> This foreign support aimed “to create a sort of instability and to spread chaos and destruction in Yemeni society.”<sup>187</sup> Though Huthi leaders celebrated Ayatollah Khomeini’s commitment to social justice and anti-imperialism, the Yemeni foreign minister stated in 2007 that “the Iranian government [had] affirmed that it [did] not intervene in the internal affairs of Yemen.”<sup>188</sup> However, the following narrative from another a Yemeni state department official has dominated national and international discourse surrounding the Huthis: “The Believing Youth started their activities under different names in the 1980s in the context of the Iranian revolution. They

<sup>184</sup> Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and periphery in northern Yemen: the Huthi phenomenon* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2010), 172.

<sup>185</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> Quoted in Salmoni et al., *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*, 170.

<sup>187</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

were trained in Iran during the Ayatollah Khomeini's era with the objective of spreading the revolution. Between that time and 2004, the Huthis prepared themselves to launch operations against the state."<sup>189</sup> This narrative twisted the political conflict into a sectarian one, motivating Saudi Arabia and internal Sunni militant groups to join the fight against the Huthis.<sup>190</sup>

The government mobilized different Sunni militias, including state troops and "unaffiliated Sunni militants."<sup>191</sup> Following state victory in the first war, Wahhabi troops took over Husayn al-Huthi's house for Friday prayers and celebrated it as a symbol of Sunni victory over "the forces of darkness."<sup>192</sup> Many journalists claimed that al-Qaeda was fighting for the state in 2007, but this was difficult to prove due to the state's 2007 ban on journalists in combat zones. While the Yemeni state may have worked with al-Qaeda, the same generals who led the Yemeni "War on Terror" operations led the fight against the Huthis. Hamidi observes, "By depicting some senior military officials who led the campaign against al-Huthi as leading the struggle against terrorism in Yemen, the government created an opportunity to dispel American suspicion about their links with radical militancy."<sup>193</sup> By framing the Sa'da Wars as a sectarian conflict, the state deflected its responsibility for the violence and rallied support from different actors against the Huthis.

### *Performing Power, But At What Cost?*

When the state invaded Marran in June 2004, it aimed to silence the voice of al-Huthi and his followers. However, the Sa'da Wars exploded into a complex conflict as international powers, Sunni militias, and various tribes entered the violence and perpetuated conflict while pursuing their own interests. As the International Crisis Group, an international non-profit organization dedicated to conflict research, explained, "the conflict [had] become self-perpetuating, giving rise to a war economy as tribes, military officers and state officials... seized the opportunity to control the porous border with Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea

<sup>189</sup> Quoted in International Crisis Group, "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb", Crisis Group Report 86 (May 2009):10.

<sup>190</sup> Hamidi, "Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen," 171.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

coastline...As competition over resources intensified, the benefits of war exceeded its drawbacks.”<sup>194</sup> The state purposely co-opted religious militants and Saudi Arabia into the conflict, but it did not mean to upend local Sa’da politics.

State brutality in Sa’da drove many locals to support the Huthis.<sup>195</sup> Toward the end of the first war, the state captured Huthi territory, and its victory might have settled the Huthi uprising and prevented future war. However, the state was committed to killing Husayn al-Huthi. State forces searched caves in the mountains until they found and killed al-Huthi and his family. The state subsequently dispersed pamphlets of al-Huthi’s mutilated body around Sa’da.<sup>196</sup> Hamidi identifies the state anxiety implicated in this action: “When he was alive and fighting alongside his followers, al-Huthi’s demonization indicated that the ghosts of the ghosts of the past had not yet disappeared...With his death, the triumphant placarding of the streets of Sa’da with the image of his body showed it to be a metonym for the ancient regime.”<sup>197</sup> However, Husayn’s death took on a mystical meaning for the Huthis. Husayn became a martyr, as his death recalled the death of the Zaidi founder, who also died while rebelling against tyranny.<sup>198</sup> The death of Husayn led to the expansion of the Huth’ manpower and improved morale.<sup>199</sup>

Additionally, indiscriminate state violence in Sa’da drove many communities to support the Huthis. The Huthis were not popular among moderate Zaidis and many tribes before the conflict, but widespread state destruction of villages and infrastructure during the conflict destroyed civilian state loyalties.<sup>200</sup> A parliamentarian in Saleh’s party explained that, “the Huthis seem to have a lot of followers, not for religious reasons but because the population feels discriminated against and excluded from development policies. Unfortunately, the destruction of villages has not helped fight that impression.”<sup>201</sup> The Huthis gained civilian loyalty by providing services to communities in Sa’da in the complete absence of government support, as demonstrated by the fact that they stole state generators

<sup>194</sup> ICG, “Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb,” ii.

<sup>195</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 325.

<sup>196</sup> Hamidi, “Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen,” 176.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 325.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> ICG, “Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb,” ii.

<sup>201</sup> Quoted in ICG, “Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb,” 130.

during the first war and gave them to villages.<sup>202</sup>

Indiscriminate state violence in the unstable and impoverished Sa'da region brought many players into the conflict who were not ideologically allied with the Huthis but sought vengeance against the state.<sup>203</sup> Brandt explains that many people “simply ‘rode the wave’ to fight for their tribe, or against their enemies and rivals, the government, or a hated shakyh.”<sup>204</sup> As a result, loyalties constantly changed and the Huthi conflict became a backdrop for many smaller conflicts. The hybrid nature of this war, with tribal, religious, political, and personal motivations, resulted in unending conflict that neither official ceasefire nor tribal customs could placate.<sup>205</sup>

Although the sixth Sa'da war technically ended in 2010, the violence catalyzed by the state in 2004 continues today.<sup>206</sup> When state forces violently entered Sa'da, Saleh opened a Pandora's Box of ever-changing tribal, religious, and regional alliances. He maintained power for decades based on an authoritarian divide-and-rule system to exacerbate differences between subgroups in Yemen, but this system imploded during the Sa'da Wars, as indiscriminate state violence destroyed civilian state loyalties, while tribal leaders, government officials, and Saudi forces perpetuated conflict for political and economic gain.<sup>207</sup> Ongoing conflict depleted state resources; and eventually, Arab Spring protests ousted Saleh in 2012.<sup>208</sup> The Gulf Cooperation Council, supported by Western powers, facilitated the creation of an unstable transitional government led by former vice president Abdrubbah Mansour Hadi. Hadi's regime proved to be Saleh's regime with a new face, which motivated the Huthis to invade Yemen's capital Sa'na in 2014, thereby catalyzing the current civil war that stretches across Yemen.<sup>209</sup>

Today, the United Nations continues to recognize Hadi as the sole legitimate representative of Yemen—despite his government's inability to

<sup>202</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 137.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> IGC, “Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb,” ii.

<sup>208</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 366.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.



effectively govern state territory or command a military on the ground.<sup>210</sup> Ostensibly, pro-government parties, such as tribes, southern secessionists, and Salafi militias, hold no loyalty to Hadi or each other, but work collectively against a common enemy, the Huthis.<sup>211</sup> Numerous peace talks have been held since the war's outbreak in March 2015, but have failed, as the UN continues to misunderstand the situation in Yemen and ignore the various groups that actually provide support, governance, and supplies to Yemenis across the country.<sup>212</sup> Salisbury reports, "Yemen has been divided into areas of territorial and political control...each territory has its own leadership structure, internal politics, and external backers, to the extent that Yemen resembles less a divided country than a collection of mini-states engaged in a complex intraregional conflict."<sup>213</sup> The Huthis possess the largest military and infrastructure for civilian support, but Saudi Arabia, Hadi's strongman and benefactor, demands Huthi disarmament to advance peace.<sup>214</sup>

There is little incentive for the Huthis and other domestic actors to accept the latest peace proposal, which calls for a unified and inclusive transitional government led by Hadi. As explored in this essay, previous constructions of a modern Yemeni nation-state failed Yemenis, as Saleh exacerbated differences between tribes and communities to retain power, and allowed Saudi Arabia and the United States to pursue their own political projects at the expense of the populace. Decades of trauma in the unified state may render reconstruction of the unified Republic of Yemen impossible.<sup>215</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how a nation-state building process inspired by Western constructs of sovereignty and identity can produce economic, political, and cultural inequalities. Though many groups within postcolonial societies have

<sup>210</sup> Peter Salisbury, "What Does the Stockholm Agreement Mean for Yemen?" *The Washington Post*, December 21, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/12/21/what-does-the-stockholm-agreement-mean-for-yemen/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.b9d07ca1b69a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/12/21/what-does-the-stockholm-agreement-mean-for-yemen/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b9d07ca1b69a)

<sup>211</sup> Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 137

<sup>212</sup> Peter Salisbury, "Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order," Chatham House, December 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/yemen-national-chaos-local-order>.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Salisbury, "What Does the Stockholm Agreement Mean for Yemen?"

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

achieved self-determination through a modern state, decades of subsequent poverty and violence in these societies have shattered the belief for many that world peace and the universal protection of individual rights can be achieved in a system of liberal nation-states. This is because the system relies on divides between “self” and “other” that perpetuate categorical hierarchies within and beyond the nation-state. Enlightenment legacies tie the legitimacy of centralized state sovereignty to a nation with a homogenous primordial history and shared values, and this has caused postcolonial anxiety among state-builders who erode the power of the people and use violence to construct legitimacy.<sup>216</sup> Krishna explains the violence of abstraction that defines the binaries of modernity and justifies violence: “To the extent that modernity is the disciplining of ambiguity and an intolerance for multiple or layered notions of identity, territory or sovereignty is invariably an either-or matter.”<sup>217</sup> In Yemen, efforts to create a homogenous national identity and strong central state divided the diverse identities that naturally comprise what it means to be Yemeni. While President Saleh promised a pluralist democracy and national development, he employed divide-and-rule tactics to keep opposition and civil society weak. The contradiction between constructions of popular sovereignty and the authoritarian reality embodies the coercive nature of the modern state, as it attempts to ideologically and forcefully manipulate citizens to legitimize territorial control.<sup>218</sup>

The story of the Huthis and the current conflict illustrates how this approach to state-building can go awry. Yemen’s long history of decentralized power, even during the Imamate era, was never overcome in the modern state, as Saleh exacerbated fragmentation by constructing categorical hierarchies for personal gain.<sup>219</sup> As the nation-state constructs a people’s historical right to territory, those excluded from this narrative, which included Zaidis and southern Yemenis, now fight in the civil war to regain power over territory that they consider historically theirs.<sup>220</sup> These primordial narratives have been produced in response to the state narrative.<sup>221</sup> Furthermore, the Huthis’ violent commitment

<sup>216</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, xix.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 170.

<sup>220</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*,

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

to gaining power was driven by state anxiety to enforce its own historical claim: “The regime’s reaction to al-Huthi, so curiously disproportionate to al-Huthi’s apparent threat, must therefore be read as an effort and an opportunity to reassert -- indeed... *establish* for the first time -- the regime’s territorial sovereignty in this area.”<sup>222</sup> As definitions of identity and territorial control altered in modern Yemen, localized conflict took on a new character with international involvement in the Sa’da Wars and civil war in 2014. Saudi Arabia and the United States continue to support the failed Yemeni state because international power dynamics have allowed them to manipulate it for decades.<sup>223</sup> Currently, Saudi and American policies combat the Yemeni forces that clash with their ideals and interests.<sup>224</sup>

To conclude, this essay has outlined three major factors that produced Huthi militancy: first, the Western nation-state building model that enabled Zaidi marginalization; second, Saudi and American activity in Yemen that intensified Huthi grievances; and third, violent state aggression that solidified the Huthis as a militant faction. As the international community works for peace in Yemen, they must overcome similar factors that perpetuate war. First, the UN must acknowledge powerful local factions and avoid technocratic top-down approaches to peace that push a new nation-state. Two of the most powerful factions, the Huthis and the Southern Movement, support local institutions for civil stability and oppose Hadi’s regime.<sup>225</sup> However, the Southern Movement also opposes the Huthis and wishes to secede, posing a serious dilemma for future state construction.<sup>226</sup> Neither the Huthis nor the Southern Movement have participated in recent UN peace talks, as the Huthis fear a Saudi air attack, while the southerners are excluded from negotiations.<sup>227</sup> Saudi Arabia and the Hadi regime argue that local institutions impede the national peace process—yet these groups must be co-opted into negotiations in order to fairly consider and mediate Yemenis’ diverse interests in

<sup>222</sup> Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 170.

<sup>223</sup> Peter Salisbury, “Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order,”

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Eric Robinson et al, “What Factors Cause Individuals to Reject Extremism in Yemen?” Rand Corporation, 2017. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1727.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1727.html)

<sup>226</sup> Robert Forster, “The Southern Transitional Council: Implications for Yemen’s Peace Process,” *Middle East Policy Council*, 2018. <http://www.mepec.org/journal/southern-transitional-council-implications-yemens-peace-process>

<sup>227</sup> Faisal Endros, “All You Need to Know About the Yemen Peace Talks,” *Al-Jazeera*, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/yemen-peace-talks-181202101535422.html>

the post-war transition.<sup>228</sup> The Hadi regime's legitimacy does not extend beyond official documentation, and its reinstatement risks another repeat of history and civil war.<sup>229</sup>

The Saudi-led coalition's military and diplomatic support of the Hadi regime poses the second obstacle to peace. Saudi Arabia, supported by the United States, possesses the only warplanes in the conflict and have caused 60% of civilian deaths.<sup>230</sup> Airstrikes specifically focus on Huthi-controlled territory, and attempt to destabilize the group by destroying civilian infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. As a powerful ally, the United States must hold Saudi Arabia accountable for atrocities in Yemen and withdraw military support to de-escalate violence.

Lastly, we must abandon the ideological commitment to the nation-state that merits state protection as legitimate violence. Saudi Arabia and the United States continue to justify military intervention in an effort to protect the Yemeni state from Huthi and Iranian extremism "that pose[s] dangers to peace and stability in the entire Middle East."<sup>231</sup> The coalition's violence in the name of regional stability over the Huthis illustrates the violent reality of hegemonic dichotomies that connect the nation-state to rationality and stability, while local dissidence is associated with irrational extremism and chaos. In theory, the nation-state rests in the sovereignty of a unified people with distinct and cohesive histories and values. This link between identity and sovereignty attempts to transcend diversity, but in the case of Yemen, demonstrates how constructions of identity embodied by the state may run counter to popular interests, and may exclude certain groups for political gain. Hegemonic conceptions of the nation link human security to state security, thereby allowing the state to justify violence against dissidence as a matter of national security. Thus, the Huthis'

<sup>228</sup> Forster, "The Southern Transitional Council."

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Sudarsan Raghavan, "Airstrike by Saudi-led Coalition Said to Hit Yemen Hospital Killing 7 Including 4 Children," *Washington Post* 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/airstrike-by-saudi-led-coalition-said-to-hit-yemeni-hospital-killing-7-including-4-children/2019/03/27/7103b829-eda9-462a-aec1-be304044ac5e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/airstrike-by-saudi-led-coalition-said-to-hit-yemeni-hospital-killing-7-including-4-children/2019/03/27/7103b829-eda9-462a-aec1-be304044ac5e_story.html).

<sup>231</sup> Quoted in Mohamad Bazzi, "The United States Could End the War in Yemen if it Wanted To," *The Atlantic*, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/iran-yemen-saudi-arabia/571465/>

rise to power illustrates how state aggression drives civil movements to defensive violence. State-builders in Yemen and across the globe must remember this cycle and avoid repressive security regimes that perpetuate violence and instability.

How can exclusionary binaries be transcended to improve future Yemeni governance and current normative frameworks of international relations? This essay has attempted to denaturalize a state's monopoly on legitimate violence by deconstructing the Republic of Yemen's official national narrative that celebrated the Saleh regime and marginalized alternative imaginings of the Yemeni nationhood. The story of the Huthis' rise to power illustrates how self/other demarcations that define identity, nationality, sovereignty and territory can be deconstructed to reveal "hegemonic social conventions susceptible to human agency and change."<sup>232</sup> Husayn al-Huthi was able to disrupt the state's oppressive status-quo by directly challenging and inverting its rhetoric, and his movement catalyzed a civil war that will redefine Yemen. The devastation of Yemeni society signals an urgency to move beyond the nation-state's violent linkage of identity and territory. We must strive for a democratic ethos that deconstructs and considers diverse identities and interests in order to transcend identity hierarchies that characterize the current nation-state model and attain truly pluralized governance on the national and international levels.<sup>233</sup> This ideological shift may create potential for new forms of social organization to arise that honor diversity, depoliticize identity, and promote a more inclusive global society.

<sup>232</sup> Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 232.

<sup>233</sup> Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 155.

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