

Yemen: Background of the “Houthi Movement” - the Zaydis

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The martyred former President of the National Salvation Government of Yemen, Saleh al Sammad

The genocidal war on Yemen is not getting the coverage it deserves. Syria gets attention because demonizing the central government is crucial towards hiding support for the armed war against it, whereas Yemen doesn't because there is no possible way to spin the war other than as Saudi Arabia telling the people of Yemen, “unless you accept a President we've chosen for Yemen, you will face genocide”.

So far the strategy for bringing attention to Yemen has involved presenting Yemenis as starving victims, which millions of them certainly are, but that's not enough. The only possibility of seeing the emergence of effective solidarity with an oppressed nation fighting for its very survival is to know their story, one that goes to the centuries long political struggle at the heart of Islamic civilisation.

The way the conflict is framed is how the Saudis want you to see it, that of Iran spreading its tentacles into the Arabian peninsula, hence all the talk about the “Iranian backed Houthi rebellion”. This however ignores that Zaydism in Yemen predates the adoption of Twelver Shiism as the state religion of Iran by many centuries (Zaydism arrived in Yemen in the 9th century, Iran became Shia at the beginning of the 16th century).

To paint this current conflict as ‘Sunni’ vs. ‘Shia’, or ‘Saudi Arabia’ vs. ‘Iran’, is a crime against history that erases Yemeni agency. The rest of this article will discuss that history, specifically as it relates to the political identity of the Zaydi Islam.

The much older power struggle in Yemen centres on “the Houthis”, or Ansarullah as they’re officially called. They are Zaydi Muslims, who in the political landscape of Islam are in a sense “the Sunnis of the Shia, and the Shia of the Sunnis”. The Zaydis name their sect after Zayd ibn Ali, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad who was martyred in the year 740, while leading a rebellion against the Umayyad monarchy.



The Umayyad Caliphate, Islam’s first Arab superpower, represents wealth and prosperity to some, tyranny and persecution to others. The Zaydis name themselves after Zayd ibn Ali whose rebellion shook the empire.

The Umayyads, capitated in Damascus, were the dynasty that took over the Islamic empire following the assassination of Zayd’s great-grandfather Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth Caliph of Islam, whom all Shia agree should have been the prophet’s immediate successor. Unlike other Shia, however, the Zaydis accept the legitimacy of the first three Caliphs much like the Sunnis, while reserving their preference for Ali ibn Abi Talib, thus making them Shia.

Naturally the Umayyad dynasty feared the popularity of the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through the marriage of his daughter Fatima with Ali ibn Abi Talib (the Ahl al Bayt) was undermining their legitimacy. One cause of their concern was a speech given by the Prophet in which he declared that the Muslims should follow the Qur’an primarily, and Ahlulbayt second. According to many, both Shia and Sunni alike, this meant that the Umayyad monarchy was illegitimate.

Both of Ali’s sons, Hasan and Husayn, were murdered by the Umayyad state, as were almost all of their descendants who rose up to political leadership. Even peaceful clerics, like Zayd’s own father, the notable ascetic ‘Zayn al Abideen’ Ali ibn Husayn, were killed on the orders of the jealous and paranoid Umayyad leaders.

Coming from a family persecuted by Umayyad rule, Zayd ibn Ali’s rebellion in 740 CE shook the foundations of the Umayyad dynasty,

whose rule is often associated by the Shia narrative with repression, decadence, and corruption. By contrast, the Sunni historic narrative emphasises the impressive civilisational achievements that were the Arab Caliphates of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties which ushered in a ‘Golden Age’ of prosperity, scientific inquiry, and intellectual debate, especially when judged against the standards of world history.

Many similarities can be made between the Umayyads and the House of Saud of today, especially given how brutally they treat the Shia population. The Al Saud family come from Najd in the centre of Arabia, however they rule over four provinces that historically were part of Yemen, and are very much Yemeni Zaydi areas. Just as Palestine is Arab territory occupied by “Israel”, the provinces of Baha, Asir, Jizan, and Najran are historically Yemeni territories occupied by “Saudi” Arabia. For Saudi Arabia therefore, the Zaydi revival led by the Ansarullah movement undermines the very legitimacy of their state and its borders.



Historically, these territories were part of Yemeni civilisation, whereas the Saud clan are from the region of Nejd, modern day Riyadh province. Zayd ibn Ali launched a rebellion against the Umayyad dynasty in the Iraqi city of Kufa. However, through sheer force of arms and use of bribery, the Umayyad armies eventually defeated the revolutionaries and killed Imam Zayd.

Zayd ibn Ali is recognised as a *Shaheed*, or martyr, by every school of thought within Islam, including the Sunnis. Indeed the Zaydi revolt received direct support and great praise from the Sunni theologian and jurist Abu Hanifa, who laid the groundwork for the biggest theological school within Sunni Islam today, the Hanafi school.

Although Zayd's revolution was eventually defeated, it sent shockwaves throughout the Islamic empire, with several revolts and rebellions against the Umayyad elite continuing for years. In the year 750, Umayyad rule was overthrown by the 'Abbasid revolution' that was made possible by the influence of Zaydi revolutionaries. The Abbasids rose to power on a wave of pro Shia support but then persecuted the Shia. Six of the Twelve Imams, beginning with Jafar al Sadeq, were killed on the orders of Abbasid Caliphs according to Shia sources. The Zaydis are often called 'the Sunni of the Shia, and the Shia of the Sunnis' in that they function as a sort of bridge between Sunni and Shia Islam, the latter often referring to the dominant Twelver school.

However, the Zaydi school predates the very notion of "Shia versus Sunni Islam". Zayd ibn Ali is seen by the Zaydis as the Fifth Imam: following the Prophet's son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib, his sons Hasan and Husayn, and Husayn's son Ali ibn Husayn, whereas the Twelvers follow the lineage of Zayd ibn Ali's younger half brother.

Zaydis differ from other Shias in accepting Zayd as the Fifth Imam, as Zayd had an older brother named Muhammad al-Baqir. However, as Zaydi doctrine states that rebellion against unjust and corrupt rulers is a sacred duty of Muslims to follow, they elected the more revolutionary-minded Zayd as their Imam instead.

Zaydis believe, like other Shias, that the Imamate must be held by a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through the marriage of his daughter Fatima and Ali ibn Abi Talib. However, the Zaydis claim that any such descendant (carrying the honorary title of *Sayyid*) can be elected to that position if they meet a list of criteria, are upright and righteous Muslims and can assemble a large enough following to be voted into office.



Ansarullah fighters and supporters march on the capital, Sana'a, photo from Sputnik

Ultimately, what ties the Zaydis to the Shia conception of Islamic history is the belief that Muslims have a duty to rebel against unjust rulers, the concept known as *khurruj* in Arabic. Sunni Islam historically has been the religion of the state, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, given that Islamic empires were hubs of relative prosperity and social progress compared to the backwardness of medieval Europe. Shia Islam by contrast emerged out of the teachings of the prophet Muhammad's family and descendants (often called *Imams*) who were persecuted by the same Islamic empires that are looked upon favourably by Sunnis for their otherwise impressive civilizational accomplishments, especially when judged against the standards of world history.

This is not to say that the Shia never held political power. After the fall of the Umayyads, Shia revolutionary fervour spread to all sides of the Islamic empire. From Morocco, where the Zaydi Idrisids took over in 788, to the Rustamids in the northern Iranian province of Tabaristan, to even several centuries of Zaydi dominion in the desert heartland of the Arab peninsula. In fact, for centuries, the *Sharifs* (custodians) of Mecca and thus also of the Ka'ba itself, were Zaydis.

Zaydi Islam was an extremely influential Shia school for many centuries. It wasn't until much later, after the rise of the (Twelver Shia) Safavid Empire in Iran in the 16th century, and the encroachment of the (Sunni) Ottoman empire in the Arab world, that the Zaydi school of thought lost much of its influence.

Yemen was by far the region where Zaydi Islam had the most impact. For over a thousand years (897 – 1962 CE), Yemen was *mostly* ruled by a Zaydi Imamate that was eventually overthrown by a republican army coup in 1962. The first Imam of Yemen, Al-Hadi ila'l-Haqq Yahya, did

not invade or conquer Yemen, but was invited by the local population to be their ruler, and espoused a theology that encouraged rational thought as the final arbiter for establishing law. Also, instead of a typical medieval monarchical system of succession, the Zaydi Imamate was ruled by a form of theocratic democracy, in which all tribes would vote to decide who amongst the Ahlulbayt would make a worthy Imam. By contrast, Saudi Arabia promotes an extreme offshoot of the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, which prefers to take scriptures literally at the expense of reason, even to the point of believing that God literally has hands (this is called *tajsim*, or anthropomorphism). This long period of Zaydi Imamate rule was only interrupted on two occasions, from 1538 to 1636, and from 1849 to 1918, when the area was occupied by the Ottoman empire, the armies of which paid a heavy price due to local Zaydi led resistance. During the first phase of that occupation the Ottomans had sent a total of 80,000 troops to Yemen, of which only 7,000 came home. Yemen resisted fiercely, but they were also weakened by these wars, leading to the long-term decline of Yemen's ancient civilisation, while the Saudis, hailing from the most historically backward part of Arabia, struck oil and rose to prominence with Anglo-American backing.

The Zaydi movement today in the form Ansarullah does not seek to politically control Yemen or establish a theocracy, rather they are a national movement, calling for a popular front against what they see as Saudi attempts to control Yemen by buying off its leaders, and have publicly announced their willingness to work with any other political faction provided they agree that Yemeni sovereignty mustn't be violated.

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