

Arabian Peninsula Background Notes

APBN-006

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The al-Huthi Conflict in Yemen

SYNOPSIS

Since 2004, the security forces of the ROY government have been battling a shadowy organization known as “the Believing Youth” (*al-shabāb al-muʿmin*) based in the mountains west of Saʿdah, the capital of Yemen’s northwestern-most province. Despite the loss of hundreds of lives, the displacement of thousands, and damages amounting to millions of dollars, the conflict refuses to die. Leadership of the movement has rested in various al-Huthi relatives, members of a *sayyid* family (*sayyids* are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad who played key theological and political roles in north Yemen until the 1962 revolution) originally from the area of Huth, a town about halfway between Saʿdah and the country’s capital at Sanʿa to the south.¹

One member of the family, Badr al-Din, achieved prominence as one of the leading *ʿulamaʿ* (plural of *ʿalim*) in a Zaydi revivalist movement centered on Saʿdah from at least the early 1990s and aimed at defending Zaydi Yemen from a perceived onslaught of Sunni Salafi and Wahhabi proselytizing and activities

in the provinces of Saʿdah and al-Jawf. About this time, Badr al-Din’s son Husayn apparently established (or at least played a founding role in the creation of) the Believing Youth group, originally created to provide instruction in Zaydi traditions and principles to boys and young men of the region, especially those of the rural highlands. At some point, Husayn and the group began to become more aggressive, probably in response to increased “Wahhabi” or Salafi proselytizing in the area (combined with specifically anti-Zaydi teachings and activities). Leading lights of the movement began leaving Saʿdah and other cities to found *hijras* (sanctuaries) in the tribal mountains west and north of Saʿdah town.² The government later claimed that group sought to defend Zaydi principles by restoring the Zaydi imamate and to rid the country of the national government, which was deemed corrupt and unresponsive, but there is no independent evidence of this contention.

Changes in the nature and emphasis of the organization seem to have prompted a number of adherents to leave it, allegedly after Husayn al-Huthi had decided on a course of rebellion

This is an *Arabian Peninsula Background Note (APBN)* written by J.E. Peterson

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and resolved to resort to violence. Believing Youth drew on Sa'dah province for most of its members, although its membership extended to three or four other governorates before the outbreak of hostilities in 2004.³ Members of the Huthi family provided leadership of the movement throughout the conflict. After Husayn b. Badr al-Din al-Huthi was killed around September 2004, his father Badr al-Din assumed leadership until he was reported to have died of an incurable disease in February 2006. Leadership passed to one of Husayn's brothers, 'Abd al-Malik. In mid-2008, there had been increasingly specious rumors that 'Abd al-Malik had been killed in May 2008.

At the same time, the adamantly Zaydi group formed one aspect of the Islamist maelstrom that has consumed much of Yemen in recent decades. Salafi sentiment has been on the increase amongst the majority of Sunni Yemenis but also in Zaydi areas. Adherents are often referred to as "Wahhabis" because they reflect the puritanism and supposed intolerance of that movement as well because of the widespread perception that Saudi Arabia - a traditional foe to most Yemenis - has devoted effort and funds to advancing the Wahhabi cause in Yemen and other countries. It may be assumed, then, that the extremism of al-Huthi and his followers is a reaction to what they regard as a creeping Salafi invasion of their territory and faith. It might also be conjectured that the violent path adopted by "Believing Youth" is a reflection of - and influenced by - the violent extremism practiced by local al-Qa'idah elements and their imitators, such as those responsible for the attacks on the USS Cole and the French tanker and the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army. Indeed, it has been alleged that the movement received early support from President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih to help counter growing Salafi influence in northern Yemen before its

growing strength prompted him to turn against it.⁴ Another spur to government action was the movement's vocal opposition to the American-instigated Iraq War and close relations between Sa'da and Washington.

Thus it was relatively obvious that the "Believing Youth" would resist any attempt to restrict or eliminate the group. The spark lighting the fuse seems to be a probable combination of the central government's unending desire to extend its authority over marginally controlled areas of the country and the reaction of Salafi elements in or close to the government to an uncompromisingly Zaydi movement. The commander of military forces in the northern region of the country is Major General 'Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, a close confidante and close relative of President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih. He is also married to the sister of Tariq al-Fadli, once an extreme Islamist who has since moderated his views.⁵ It can be surmised that 'Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar was prompted to act on Islamist principles as well as his military duty. It has been rumored as well that both 'Ali Muhsin and President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih have become "Wahhabis" and that their new-found ideology has played a key role in their prosecution of Zaydi activists.⁶

While the impetus for the movement and the rebellion seems to derive from purely internal causes, the Republic of Yemen (ROY) government frequently complained that the group was receiving outside assistance. Primarily, this was said to be Iran, a predominantly Shi'ah country although of the Ja'fari (or Ithna'ashari) variety rather than the Zaydi form found in Yemen. Husayn al-Huthi was alleged to have met with the Iranian president in 1993 and it was contended that Badr al-Din al-Huthi visited Iran in 2003 and perhaps sought refuge there during the opening stages of the conflict in 2004.⁷

Muammar al-Qadhafi's Libya was also accused of backing the movement, although his motives (beyond possible mischief) were not clear.⁸ Others have advanced a far-fetched claim that the affair represented a proxy war between Saudi Arabia (backing the government) and Iran (backing the Huthis).

The continuing impasse in negotiations between the Huthi group and the ROY government prompted San'a' to accept Qatari mediation, beginning in May 2007. While agreement on a ceasefire was reached in June 2007, it required a face-to-face meeting between Huthi principals and government representatives in Qatar in early 2008 to produce signatures on an implementation plan. This, however, was repeatedly violated – apparently on both sides – in the following months, leading to increasingly heavy fighting. The government announced in May 2008 that it had broken the back of the rebellion but such pronouncements had proved optimistic in the past. Indeed, the ferocity of subsequent fighting around 'Amran north of San'a' and in Bani Hushaysh near San'a' demonstrated the resilience of the movement. In addition, the Huthis are said to recruited followers from other tribes and to have purchased arms from the army, which has suffered desertions. Fighting again intensified in the mountains west of Sa'dah in late June 2008. In July, the government claimed once again that the rebellion had been brought to an end.

Because of the ROY government's blackout on information from and travel to Sa'dah province during the conflict, few indisputable facts are available. Unverifiable estimates of casualties vary widely but certainly run into hundreds, if not a thousand or more, of deaths. Similarly, the total of inhabitants of the region who have been displaced by the

fighting is unknown but estimates run as high as 120,000. At least a thousand Zaydis have been rounded up in "preventive arrests." It seems clear that government forces have carried out extensive and indiscriminate aerial bombing, rocketing, and shelling in the conflict area, causing unnecessary misery. It has also been alleged that the government has paid friendly tribesmen to assist its forces in the conflict and enlisted Saddamist army officers from Iraq, as well as deliberately ordering Salafis and soldiers from the south to the forefront of the fighting. For its part, the Huthis have gained support from the Zaydi equivalent of Salafis as well as non-affiliated individuals and groups who oppose government policy and actions. There are also allegations that the Huthis have paid men to fight for them,⁹ although this seems doubtful.

In May 2008, the International Committee of the Red Cross was prompted to seek additional funds to address the humanitarian crisis on the order of one and a half times their annual budget for all of Yemen, and in June, the unstable situation forced the evacuation of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) teams working in hospitals and clinics in rural areas of the governorate of Sa'dah to be evacuated to San'a'.¹⁰ During the first half of 2008, the Red Cross had provided tents, furniture, air conditioners and household necessities to 80,000 area residents, as well as providing drinking water and toilets to camps of displaced persons.¹¹ The United States government has urged an end to the fighting and a truce to allow supplies to reach beleaguered areas while the European Union has set aside €1 million for humanitarian relief.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Ahmar, ʿAli b. Muhsin al- A close confidante and close relative of President ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih (sometimes said to be his half-brother), he is sometimes said to be a father figure of the ruling Bayt al-Ahmar clan of Sanhan tribe. His sister is married to Tariq al-Fadli, a prominent Islamist and “Afghan” of southern elite background. A career army officer and longtime commander of the 1st Armored Brigade, ʿAli Muhsin played a prominent role in defeating southern forces during the 1994 civil war. As commander of military forces in northern Yemen, he has been in charge of the campaign against the al-Huthi group since its inception in 2004. He has been accused – a view that is widely believed – of having provoked the fighting through his aggressiveness and presumed Salafi beliefs.

Habrah, Salih Ahmad ʿAli. A top deputy to ʿAbd al-Malik al-Huthi, Salih represented the movement in negotiations in 2007 and 2008, and signed the implementation agreement in Qatar on 1 February 2008.

Huthi, ʿAbd al-Malik Badr al-Din al- Assumed leadership of the Believing Youth movement in February 2006 upon the death of his father Badr al-Din. Said to have been born in Matarah district, if not actually in Dahyan.

Huthi, ʿAbdullah b. Yahya al- Another member of the Huthi family who was one of those Zaydi revivalists who fled Saʿdah and other towns in the 1990s to establish *hijras* (sanctuaries) in the uncorrupted countryside. ʿAbdullah settled in Takhyah, just outside Saʿdah.

Huthi, Badr al-Din al- One of the leading ʿulamaʿ of a Zaydi revivalist movement centered on Saʿdah from at least early 1990s

seemed to be Badr al-Din al-Huthi (who wrote as early as 1979 a rebuttal of Ibn Baz’s fatwa prohibiting prayer behind a Zaydi imam). He and others were prompted by a perceived need to preserve “the Zaydi-Yemeni heritage from the onslaught of a proselytizing Wahhabi movement in such traditional Zaydi provinces as Saʿdah and al-Jawf combined with neglect and opposition to Zaydi concerns and issues by the government in Sanʿa.”¹² Father of Husayn al-Huthi and said to be 82 in 2005 when he took over leadership of the group following his son’s death in September 2004. Another son Yahya said he had 13 sons, of whom it was claimed in May 2005 that four of them had been killed and three jailed in the conflict.¹³ He was said to have died in February 2006 of an incurable disease and leadership of the movement thereupon passed to another of his sons, ʿAbd al-Malik.¹⁴

Huthi, Husayn b. Badr al-Din al- A former member of parliament (Majlis al-Nuwwab) and the head of an organization known as al-Shabab al-Muʿmin (“The Believing Youth”) who police tried to arrest on June 2004, setting off the crisis. His brother ʿAbd al-Salam or ʿAbd al-ʿAziz was arrested in June 2004.¹⁵ Al-Huthi had managed Zaydi *madrasabs* or religious schools for young men before the conflict began in 2004. He was said to have been killed on 9 or 10 September 2004 when government troops overran his cave complex at Jabal Marran.¹⁶ Later reports were more ambiguous, confirming only that he had disappeared while the Huthis contended that he had been murdered during a mediation truce.¹⁷

Huthi, Muhammad b. Badr al-Din al- Arrested in March 2005, he was ordered released by President Salih in May 2006 as part of the presidential amnesty announced

in September 2005.¹⁸

Huthi, Yahya b. Badr al-Din al- Brother of Believing Youth founder Husayn, a member of parliament (Majlis al-Nuwwab), and a mediator during the first fighting in June 2004. He began to act as a spokesman for the group in 2005 from his refuge in Sweden. In February 2007, Yemen made an official request to Libya for his extradition and began steps to strip him of his parliamentary immunity. He subsequently relocated to Germany and the Yemeni government sought to have him extradited from there while parliament continued exploring means of stripping him of immunity.

Huthi, Zayd b. ʿAlī al- Said to be deputy leader of “The Believing Youth.” Killed by government forces on 29 June 2004 according to the 26 September website.

Ruzami, ʿAbdullah al- Described as a top aide to Husayn al-Huthi. Yemeni forces claimed to have killed him on 6 July 2004 but then they also claimed to have killed him on 2 September 2004.¹⁹

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT²⁰

Events in 2004

On 20 June 2004, Yemeni police and army attempted to arrest Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a former member of parliament and the head of an organization known as al-Shabab al-Muʿmin (“The Believing Youth”) in the Marran district of the northern province of Saʿdah. The action set off a two-day skirmish that resulted in the deaths of seven soldiers and the wounding of four more in the first two days of fighting. Three Huthi supporters were reported killed and another six were wounded. Government forces were

reported to have arrested 30 other supporters by 23 June. Tribal sources alleged that the incident began on the evening of 20 June when al-Huthi’s followers attacked a military checkpoint. The government alleged that that al-Huthi and his group were dedicated to restoring the Zaydi imamate and it had accused al-Huthi of creating a militia, setting up roadblocks, and inciting his followers to chant anti-American slogans in mosques, thus classifying the movement as an extremist religious group. Another charge was that Huthi had stated that democracy would bring a Jewish leader to power in Yemen.

The fighting escalated in various locations around Marran and Saʿdah in the next few days and the Ministry of the Interior claimed that 46 group members were killed, 35 wounded, and 43 arrested (among them al-Huthi’s brother ʿAbd al-Salam). The ministry also announced that guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and land mines had been seized. Sources close to the Huthi group put the death toll at about 200 while the government said it had lost seven security officers dead and another five wounded. Two days of talks ended inconclusively and the government stepped up its rhetoric, accusing al-Huthi of inciting sectarian strife and spreading “deviant” thought and “extremist ideology.” The two sides gave conflicting versions about the failure of negotiations and mediators (including al-Huthi’s brother Yahya, a member of parliament) departed. The army resumed bombarding the Marran area on 27 June, with accusations by at least one mediator that the army seemed to want the fighting to continue. Helicopter gunships were called in while warplanes accidentally bombed a market in Haydan, killing five bystanders, prompting further displacement of area residents. On the 29th, government forces claimed to have killed Zayd b. ʿAlī al-Huthi, described as the deputy

head of the movement.

The skirmishing continued into July, with government claims on 1 July that opposition deaths had reached 60, while the security forces had suffered nine deaths. Two days later, Rashad al-ʿAlami, the Minister of the Interior reported to parliament that 86 Huthi supporters died and 331 had been arrested, mostly before the fighting began on 20 June, and that 32 government troops had been killed. ʿAlami also alleged that the group had foreign support because each member received an allowance of \$200 a month. The General People's Congress (GPC; the party of the president and by far the most powerful party in Yemen) made the allegation specific on 6 July when its website proclaimed that "Al-Huthi has been campaigning and teaching his followers to carry the banner of new Islam and be ready for the battle against Jews, Christians, and America and Israel because they are planning to hit Iran and Lebanon's Hizbullah." Yahya al-Huthi quickly denied any links with Iran.

A main Huthi lieutenant, ʿAbdullah al-Ruzami, was killed by 6 July 2004, according to the government, which raised its estimate of rebels killed to at least 141. On the 9th, the government said another 25 supporters had been killed and announced a YR 10 million (\$54,000) reward for Husayn al-Huthi's capture. The following day a security forces attack on al-Huthi's position in Miran resulted in the death of five soldiers, bringing the total to 41. On the 15th, Shaykh Muhammad Jabir Janhadam and a number of other Huthi supporters were killed in army assaults. The continuing fighting cut off food and health care to residents and bodies were said to be rotting in the streets. At the same time, however, the army chief of staff, Major General Muhammad ʿAli al-Qasimi, who was overseeing government operations, claimed

that the army was in control of Saʿdah and was preparing a final assault on al-Huthi's hideout in a cave near Marran. The following assault killed an additional 90 Huthi supporters, bringing the reported total to about 300. The army was said to have gained control of a key position at Wadi al-Futi on 16 July, cutting off rebel supply lines.

The government halted operations again on 22 July to encourage Husayn al-Huthi to surrender and sent religious scholars to negotiate with him. During the two weeks (?) of mediation, an intelligence building in Saʿdah was attacked and three suspects were arrested. The negotiations faltered once again.

As a consequence, the government marshaled some 2000 troops, backed by warplanes, helicopters, artillery, and tanks, in the area and launched a new offensive on 5 August, despite continuing mediation. A day later, the government announced their capture of al-Huthi's last stronghold and that it was conducting door-to-door searches for him. The affair was far from over, however. On 15 August, an army camp near the Saudi border was attacked with mortar grenades but beaten off. Reports also emerged that Husayn al-Huthi's group was still controlling three locations in the Marran mountains. Subsequent fighting claimed another 30 or more lives and, on 19 August, military sources claimed that the war had killed 900 people altogether. At the same time, the government claimed that control had been established over all the regions in which the group had previously been positioned - including al-Jamimah, al-Sulaymaniyah, and Marran - and that they had been pushed into a small area of Jabal Salman near Marran.

A few days later, on 23 August, the Deputy Army Chief of Staff, Major General ʿAli Salah al-Din, said that a major victory had been achieved and the group had been ousted from

its last stronghold. Among the dead, he said, were the second-in-command of the organization, ‘Abdullah ‘Ali Maslah Sanad, and two other senior aides, ‘Abdullah Nasir al-Sahar and Dayfallah. Al-Huthi, however, was still hiding out in the mountains near the Saudi border with a handful of supporters.

The optimistic tone of this announcement was misplaced, however. A Huthi ambush on the following day managed to kill eleven soldiers. Even the assertion of President ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Salih in London a few days later that the army had seized control of all the region had to be tempered by admission that troops were chasing al-Huthi across the mountains. The rebellion refused to die. Another battle took place on 2 September at Jabal Salman in the Marran area, during which Brigadier General Hamid al-Qushaybi was seriously wounded and ten of his soldiers were killed. Government officials claimed that 30 Huthi followers were killed, including ‘Abdullah al-Ruzami (earlier reported killed in June).

Another spike in violence occurred on 8-9 September when bombs exploded in two incidents in Sa‘dah province, one killing eight people and the other killing six people in a market north of Sa‘dah. Although no responsibility was claimed for the blasts, the timing indicated that they might have been a last-ditch effort by al-Huthi to stave off government onslaught on his entrenched position in a cave complex on Jabal Marran. An all-out offensive involving several thousand soldiers on 9-10 September was successful in over-running the cave complex and killing Husayn al-Huthi. Once again, the government announcement that “This is the end of the rebellion” was to prove overly confident. The Ministry of the Interior sought to deflect criticism of its heavy-handedness by insisting that documents had been seized proving the

involvement of some local and regional sides, in addition to figures and parties with sectarian and secessionist leanings, in assisting the rebellion.” A military source alleged that Saudi Shi‘ah businessmen had assisted al-Huthi.

Events in 2005

The death of Husayn al-Huthi did not end the fracas as Husayn’s father, Badr al-Din al-Huthi, left Sa‘dah to take over control of the remaining group. Skirmishes began on 19 March 2005 and fierce fighting erupted on 27 March when al-Huthi’s followers began attacking police and security positions in Sa‘dah province (including Suhar, Dahyan, and Bakim). This provoked the army to launch a large scale operation involving helicopters against the rebels. Some 24 hours of fighting produced the death of 10 police officers and as many as 40 of al-Huthi group. More skirmishes took place through the end of March and into early April. Reports spoke of 15 individuals killed on 31 March and another 36 or more on 2 April after the Huthis attacked an army camp at Nishur; fighting also took place around al-Shafa‘ah and al-Rizamat. The government asserted that about 800 followers had been arrested and the schools run by the group had been closed.

Active fighting continued for another ten days. Eight Huthis and five soldiers died during an army offensive on 4 April. Two days later, an advance of army troops and counter-terrorism units against Huthi positions in al-Shafiyah and Wadi Nushur resulted in more heavy casualties with approximately 30 deaths. At the same time, the deputy governor of Sa‘dah, Hasan Manaa {sic}, was ambushed in his car in Sa‘dah town: five bodyguards were wounded but he was unhurt. More fighting and tank and artillery

fire on rebel positions persisted but President ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih told reporters on 12 April that government troops had taken control of Huthi strongholds and that most fighting had ended on the 6th. It was estimated that the three weeks of fighting had claimed 170 lives. Badr al-Din al-Huthi escaped unharmed.

The scale of the fighting increased in 2005 in part because of a change of Huthi strategy. Instead of concentrating their defense on an isolated mountain stronghold as in 2004, they began to carry their attacks to settlements and towns. To some extent, the group also attracted approval if not support beyond its immediate constituency by its opposition to a government that many Yemenis saw as cliquish and corrupt. In addition, the Huthi group regarded it as their duty to oppose a government that did not follow *shariʿah*, let alone follow the teachings of Zaydism. Although chances of negotiation seemed slight – another of Badr al-Din’s sons, Yahya, spoke to the press from Sweden claiming that four of Badr al-Din’s sons had been killed and another three jailed – a dialogue committee continued to talk to the group’s leaders. The committee’s head, Judge Hamud al-Haytar, had been involved in the reeducation of Islamist extremists, including members of al-Qaʿidah.

Meanwhile, the violence continued. A series of attacks in Sanʿaʿ attributed to the group culminated in the wounding of five soldiers on 7 May 2005 when hand grenades were thrown at a military vehicle. The government made 21 arrests in the attacks and claimed that they had been planning to carry out assassinations. Shortly afterwards, President Salih appeared on television to announce that he had granted a request for a pardon from Badr al-Din al-Huthi. The government calculated at that time that 525 people had died in the fighting and put losses at YR 52 billion (\$274 million). Nevertheless,

another grenade attack on 25 May led to the death of two Huthis and the capture of a cache of explosives, and the sentencing shortly afterwards of Huthi supporter Yahya Husayn al-Daylami to death and his companion Muhammad Miftah, both judges, to eight years in prison on charges of backing a rebel movement and spying.

Another trial of 34 supporters (including an army officer and a woman) began raucously on 15 August but then President Salih used the 26 September anniversary of the 1962 revolution to announce an amnesty for all jailed supporters of the movement and, in an apparent attempt to smooth matters over, added that the government would compensate the Hamid al-Din family, which had provided the last Zaydi imams.

Once again, claims that the insurgency had ended were disproved by further fighting. A series of clashes in late November culminated in a bombardment by tanks against Huthi strongholds outside of Saʿdah on the 30th, bringing the number of deaths to about 20 Huthis and at least three soldiers. At the same time, the government continued to apply the carrot, releasing four prominent supporters – including Muhammad Qatah, ʿAbd al-Khalīq al-Matari – and over 500 other detainees. Nevertheless, 36 people remained on trial and al-Daylami and Miftah remained in prison.

Events in 2006

The year 2006 began with an assassination attempt on an adviser to the Ministry of Justice, Yahya Musa, by Huthi supporters in the town of Dhamar, south of Sanʿaʿ. At about the same time, a military convoy was ambushed outside Saʿdah: six soldiers were killed and five rebels died when troops counterattacked. By early February, the toll in clashes had reached 20.

Badr al-Din al-Huthi was reported to have died in February of an incurable disease and leadership of al-Shabab al-Mu'min passed to another of his sons, 'Abd al-Malik. At the same time, the new governor of Sa'dah Province, Brigadier General Yahya al-Shami, sought to defuse the situation by offering a safe return home to the group's members and the government announced that 627 people had been released under terms of the presidential amnesty. But a shootout took place on 15 April at the main mosque of Harf Sufyan district in 'Amran province, apparently when Huthi supporters attacked policemen guarding the mosque. Four were left dead.

More conciliatory measures followed from the government. The Ministry of the Interior was ordered to release another of Badr al-Din al-Huthi's sons, Muhammad, who had been arrested in March 2005, and President Salih ordered that the house and possessions of Husayn al-Huthi be returned to his family, along with a monthly salary. Judge Muhammad 'Ali Luqman, who had been sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2004 for supporting Husayn al-Huthi, was released on 10 August after a pardon from the president. However, Huthi activist Ibrahim Sharaf al-Din was sentenced to death on 22 November 2006 for plotting to assassinate officials and carry out attacks on government posts; 25 fellow accused received sentences of up to 11 years.

Events in 2007

The rebellion heated up again on 27 January 2007 when the group led by 'Abd al-Malik al-Huthi attacked army checkpoints in Sa'dah province and killed six soldiers, losing seven of its own members in the process. The group had threatened already the Jewish village of al-Salim for selling alcohol, causing about 45 Jews to flee and seek refuge in a hotel

elsewhere in the province. Another attack on a checkpoint in al-Ruzamat region of Sa'dah province on 1 February resulted in the deaths of ten soldiers and the wounding of another 20. The total number of soldiers killed during the week rose to at least 22. The head of the National Security Agency, 'Ali Muhammad al-Anisi subsequently told the Majlis al-Shura that 42 soldiers and policemen had been killed since the renewal of confrontations on 27 December 2006. Furthermore, he charged that al-Huthi's group had built fortified locations and purchased "a huge quantity of light, medium, and heavy weapons" in preparation for fierce battle with the security forces. Some opposition members joined the ruling GPC in a parliament vote on 10 February 2007 backing the use of whatever military action was necessary to end the affair.

Shortly afterward, Yemen made an official request to Libya for extradition of Yahya b. Badr al-Din al-Huthi who was accused of being a major leader of the group. The ROY government also began steps to strip Yahya of his parliamentary immunity.

Another spike in the fighting occurred in mid-February, with the government admitting it had suffered some 90 deaths among soldiers since the conflict began while local estimates ran to some 100 rebels killed. Some officials alluded to support by Iran and Libya while President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih called al-Huthi's followers "ignorant forces of darkness who adopted deviant terrorist & racist ideas" and added they "don't believe in democracy or freedom. They are agents who have sold themselves to harm the nation & its interests." 'Abd al-Malik al-Huthi denied in an interview that his group had Iranian or Libyan links. Another 15 soldiers died in the following two days. On 25 February, Yahya b. Badr al-Din al-Huthi claimed from Germany, where he was seeking political asylum, that the group had

opened “new fronts” in Sa‘dah province and might expand its operations to other areas. He also explained that he had been invited to Libya by Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi who wished to mediate in the conflict. Three days later, the Yemeni parliament lifted Yahya’s immunity. Despite al-Huthi’s denials of Libyan aid, the ROY government remained firm in its accusations and began deporting Libyan children receiving treatment for AIDS in Yemen and preventing its own citizens from travelling to Libya.

Another set of clashes took place in mid-March. The government admitted the death of 12 soldiers in fighting on 12-13 March and the army claimed on 18 March to have killed at least 25 rebels in fighting in the Dukhaysh, Bani Mu‘in, al-Talh, al-Salim, and Al al-Sayfi areas of Sa‘dah province. Some 2500 civilians were said to have been driven from their homes by the fighting.

On the defensive, the group turned to other strategies. On 26 March, group members attacked students of the Sunni Islamist Dammaj School in Jabal al-Khanajir just north of Sa‘dah, killing a Frenchman and a Briton who had been studying Arabic at the school. Then attackers burst into al-‘Amiriyah mosque in ‘Amran (north of San‘a’) and set the worshippers on fire: three of them died and more than 30 were injured. Although there was no evidence to link them, there was suspicion that the Believing Youth had carried out the atrocity.

More fighting between the group and the army took place in April. On the 9th, the government said 25 soldiers and about 20 Huthis had been killed over the previous five days. It put the total number of deaths at 157 soldiers and about 315 rebels since January 2007 and said that about 10,000 people who had fled their homes had been accommodated in temporary camps. ‘Ali Muhammad

Mujawwar, upon being appointed Prime Minister on 31 March, told the press that negotiations with Believing Youth were impossible because they understood nothing but force. At the same time, he was forced to admit that “volunteers” had been encouraged by the government to assist in the fighting and diplomats in San‘a’ said that “volunteers” consisted of thousands of tribesmen from all regions of the country. Shortly afterwards, the government reiterated its claims that Libya and Iran had been supporting the group and withdrew its ambassadors from both countries.

The fighting picked up again in mid-May with intense firefights between the armed forces, employing tanks, artillery, and helicopters, and the Huthis. Estimates of the total dead ranged up to 3500 since February with more than 30,000 inhabitants displaced. On 13 May, the army and allied tribesmen managed to recapture a government building in the Razih area, a month after it had fallen to the Huthis, and also regained control of the Qala‘ah. More fighting took place south of Sa‘dah. The army stepped up its offensive by carrying out simultaneous attacks in an attempt to prevent the movement regrouping in another location. At the same time, rumors of Qatari attempts to mediate first began to appear. A security source was quoted as saying that about 450 soldiers and some 600 Huthis had been killed since the conflict began. The Al al-Sayf area fell to the government on 15 May and insurgent positions in al-Mifrakh and al-Dakayik mountains were bombarded from the air. Another front was in the Dahyan area (al-Sari) where the Huthis had attacked farms owned by parliamentary speaker Shaykh ‘Abdullah al-Ahmar shortly after he had encouraged tribes in the Sa‘dah area to cooperate with the government.

That wave of fighting was followed by conciliatory signs on both sides. President ‘Ali

ʿAbdullah Salih said on 22 May he would consider the group's demands and promised fair trials for all accused of "war crimes" but added that a return to the Zaydi imamate was out of the question. Meanwhile, Yahya al-Huthi, representing the movement from Germany, said the group wanted a presidential amnesty for everyone, the release of all prisoners, the return of all remains, and approval for the forming of an independent political party, as well reconstruction of damages in Sa'dah province and the payment of compensation. The mood on 31 May when an army shell struck a petrol station at Suq al-Layl and killed 15 people. The army defended its action by accusing the movement of seeking to seize the station and stock up on fuel.

Nevertheless, Qatar successfully brokered a ceasefire on 16 June. In return for the movement handing over its heavy weapons, the government promised to release its prisoners, pay for reconstruction and aid some 30,000 displaced inhabitants to return home. But the deal began to unravel almost immediately when ʿAbd al-Malik al-Huthi failed to join two of his brothers and another aide in exile in Qatar. Reports held that the agreement created a fissure within Believing Youth ranks and internecine fighting took place in Martah {sic}, as well as continued attacks on government forces. A splinter group reformed under the leadership of Daghsan Ahmad Daghsan to oppose the agreement and ʿAbd al-Malik al-Huthi was said to be demanding new conditions, including return of the corpse of his brother Husayn, the original leader of the rebellion killed in 2004. It was also alleged that a number of shaykhs in the area were taking a neutral stance because they had been excluded from the negotiations, presumably so they would be excluded from reconstruction and compensation actions. More confrontations were registered on 23 June in

Wadi al-Fil east of Sa'dah, as well as in Qutb, Qatabir, and Zuwayb in which tribesmen took part on the side of the army. Other movement members were said to be returning to their villages as a result of the presidential pardon.

In a statement issued on 5 July, the mediation committee (composed of Yemeni members of parliament and Qatari officers) accused the Believing Youth of violating the ceasefire on 200 occasions and failing to implement their side of the agreement. Nevertheless, on 11 July ʿAbd al-Malik al-Huthi surrendered 61 army officers and soldiers that had been captured amidst allegations of non-compliance on both sides. At the same time, he complained that the government was failing to carry out its side of the agreement and the group seemed convinced that the army, as well as tribes that backed the government, was just waiting for them to surrender and give up their arms so it could attack them. The impasse provoked Qatar to recall its members of the mediation committee on 22 July. A ray of hope came on 13 August when the Huthis were said to have accepted an implementation plan for the original agreement. Those hopes were to be dashed again as the plan was not implemented. As an omen, fighting broke out at Ghamr in October between group members and the police.

Events in 2008

Fighting broke out yet again on 10 January 2008 when Huthis attacked army camps in Jabal Marran and the army responded with artillery, helicopters, and tank bombardments. It was followed by a Huthi ambush that killed two soldiers. The skirmishes appeared to prompt both sides to agree to a new implementation plan. The plan was signed on 1 February in Doha under the supervision of the Qatari heir apparent. Dr. ʿAbd al-Karim

al-Iryani, political adviser to President ʿAli ʿAbdullah Salih, represented the ROY government while Salih Ahmad ʿAli Habrah, aide to ʿAbd al-Malik al-Huthi, signed for the movement. The event was also attended by Yahya al-Huthi, who came from his exile in Germany, and Major General ʿAli Muhsin al-Ahmar. The new plan was said not to have changed any of the original conditions but spelled out in detail how the agreement was to be implemented and humanitarian issues resolved. A new committee, including one movement member, was formed to carry out the provisions of the plan.

Despite advances on the negotiating front, the fighting never ended. The killing of a shaykh of the pro-government Bakhtan tribe provoked skirmishes between the tribe and the movement on 6 April resulting in about 18 deaths. At about the same time, Huthi followers apparently looted and demolished Jewish houses in the area. The fighting threatened to derail the cease-fire as the eleven-member Qatari mediation team departed Saʿdah for Sanʿaʿ in frustration. A further blow came when a convoy escorting a GPC member of parliament, Salih al-Hindi, in al-Khaymah in Saʿdah province was ambushed by Huthis. Al-Hindi, his sons, and three bodyguards were killed. A month later, Yemeni security forces claimed that they had arrested his killer, Fayiz ʿAbdullah Qarhash, in al-ʿAyn in Saʿdah province.

The government accused the Huthis of not withdrawing from their fortified positions in Jabal Azan, al-Naqah, and Matarah while the army was honoring its agreement to withdraw and 323 movement members had been released from detention. Speaking for the Believing Youth, Shaykh Salih Habrah contended that once the army had withdrawn to all its pre-2004 positions, the movement's members would come down from the mountains and

give up their arms. The government also insisted that the Qatari team was continuing to work on implementing the initiative.

The situation was not helped by continuing incidents. A soldier was killed and another wounded in an ambush as they attended Friday prayers at a mosque in the Haydan district on 25 April. This sparked subsequent firefights and reports of the army's use of heavy artillery. The situation of the Qatari team remained confusing as reports said that they had returned to Sanʿaʿ, presumably from Qatar. Another incident on 29 April between Huthis and pro-government tribes led to the death of eight men. On 30 April, the group attacked a military convoy at Dhahyan in northern Saʿdah, killing seven soldiers. The following day, an attack on an army personnel carrier at Zaʿafa {sic} in the Haydan district killed four soldiers.

Another dismaying aspect in the long-running conflict took place on 2 May when a bomb rigged to a motorcycle exploded outside a mosque in Saʿdah during Friday prayers, killing some 15-18 people and wounding more than 60. A number of army officers or the mosque preacher, an aide to Major General ʿAli Muhsin al-Ahmar, seemed to be the target. The government blamed the Huthi group and arrested six people in Saʿdah but the group denied any responsibility.

The mosque attack seemed to intensify the hostilities. Hours afterward, two Huthi members were reported killed while attacking a checkpoint at Munbah; three policemen also died. More fighting at Munbah on the following day killed ten people, including one soldier, three Huthis, and six tribesmen allied to the government. Then on 4 May, an army offensive aimed at regaining control of a military camp at Dafaʿa {sic} in Haydan district resulted in the claimed death of 19 Huthis. The camp, held by the Believing

Youth for the previous three months, was retaken successfully.

The violence overshadowed the return of the Qatari mediating team to Sa‘dah on 4 May and engendered a sense of urgency to prevent the truce from breaking down completely. The team met with Believing Youth deputy Salih Habrah but failed to reach a satisfactory conclusion. Habrah claimed that 80,000 troops were deployed in Sa‘dah province. Then a Yemeni court sentenced four Huthis (three in absentia) to death on 12 May for the killing of two soldiers in a 2007 ambush. The military also intensified its operations with MiG-29 and F-16 aircraft reportedly bombing areas in Dahyan, Matarah, and Ja‘malah, missiles hitting other sites, and heavy bombardment by tanks. Rumors arose that ‘Abd al-Malik al-Huthi had been killed in Dahyan. As a result, the Qatari mediation collapsed once again, although frantic negotiations were also said to be going on in the presidential palace in San‘a’. These collapsed as well and the Qatari mediators left the country again. The severity of the fighting prompted the International Committee of the Red Cross to appeal for an additional \$8 million to provide food, water, and medical assistance to the people of the area on top of the organization’s original 2008 budget for Yemen of \$5.8 million.

On 16 May, the security chief of Sa‘dah province, Brigadier General Muhammad Salih Turayq, was ambushed by Huthis. Two of his bodyguards were killed and he was forced to take refuge in a village for two days until reinforcements arrived from Sa‘dah. The incident was the opening move in the dispersion of Huthi followers throughout the Bani Hushaysh area where they began attacking security forces vehicles and patrols, provoking a strong reaction by the government.

Reports of the death of ‘Abd al-Malik al-Huthi continued to be surrounded by confusion. More reports of his death or wounding circulated during late May, including that he had been admitted to a hospital in Dahyan. Believing Youth sources denied the story but all communications were being handled by Salih Habrah. A full-scale army offensive resumed. One front concentrated on the Bani Hushaysh area, some 30 kilometers north of San‘a’. On 27 May, a Ministry of Defense official announced that government forces had “crushed the dens of strife and rebellion .. in Bani Hushaysh” after three days of heavy fighting. Some fighting was reported also in the ‘Amran, Hajjah, Dhamar, and Ibb governorates. The other front was in the Matarah and al-Naq‘ah districts of Sa‘dah province. The government asserted on 25 May that they had gained control of Khamis al-Mihwar, Suwayh, and al-Margham in Saqayn district and were close to taking Jabal al-‘Ayn. Battles were intensifying in the Marran district. The following day, al-Jazirah television in Doha aired an audiotape in which the speaker claimed to be ‘Abd al-Malik al-Huthi and denied that he or any other of his group’s leaders had been killed or wounded in the recent fighting. At the same time, though, Abu ‘Alī ‘Abdullah al-Hakim, the Huthi commander in the Dahyan area was said to have been killed.

The government pronouncement of victory in Bani Hushayh was considerably premature as three days of air strikes and shelling at the end of May were required to stem a Huthi advance to within 12 miles of San‘a’ according to observers. Defensive precautions were taken in the capital. At the same time, more fighting broke out in Harf Sufyan district in ‘Amran province and the rebels were said to have cut the main road north, preventing government troops and supplies moving to ‘Amran and

Sa'dah.

The government's response was to step up legal measures against various Huthis. Parliament was pushed to revoke the immunity of Yahya al-Huthi in preparation for charging him with supporting terrorist and sabotage acts. On 9 June, thirteen accused Huthi followers were sentenced to jail terms and one was sentenced to death. Among them was a journalist, 'Abd al-Karim al-Khaywayni, editor of the opposition newspaper al-Shura.

Fighting intensified towards the end of June, with the government reporting an concentrated assault on Huthi positions in the Sa'dah mountains, especially Haydan and the principal Huthi stronghold at Matarah, as well as around Mahadah south of Sa'dah city and Dahyan to Sa'dah's north. A principal objective of the army seemed to be to relieve the 17th Military Division, which apparently had been under siege in the Jabal Marran area for more than six weeks and had run out of supplies. Sources sympathetic to the Huthis alleged that the division's commander, 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Shahari, also besieged, was one of the

principal Salafi opponents of the Huthis.

For its part, the government announced in early July that its forces had advanced towards Marran and assumed control of a number of strategic points in the surrounding area. This was swiftly denied by Yahya al-Huthi, who counter-charged that the Saudis had provided \$25 billion to the ROY government to assist in eradicating the movement (while denying any Iranian role). On 16 July, the Huthis were accused of killing the deputy governor of al-Jawf province (northwest of San'a') along with three tribal *shaykhs* accompanying him. A day later, President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih announced on television that the fighting had come to an end. This contention, like so many in the past was contradicted by reports of continued skirmishes. Government spokesmen, however, insisted that the truce had come at the request of al-Huthi leaders and that all roads to Sa'dah had been opened and government troops had been withdrawn from Marran and Khawlan.

Notes:

1. Confusion arises from the existence of two al-Huthi families in the area, both of *sayyid* descent. One family established its roots in the Razih area west of Sa'dah with the arrival of 'Ali b. Husayn al-Huthi, an itinerant *alim* (religious scholar) who settled there in the 1870s. His son 'Ali inherited his father's mantle and took part in the 1960s civil war as minor military leader on the royalist side. See Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), pp. 283 and 298. This family is descended from al-Husayn b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib while the Huthi family involved in the present conflict is descended from al-Hasan b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib. The date of its arrival in the Sa'dah region is unclear. Communication from Shelagh Weir.
2. Bernard Haykel, "A Zaydi Revival?" *Yemen Update*, No. 36 (Spring-Winter 1995), p. 21.
3. *Yemen Times* (San'a'), 15 February 2007.
4. *New York Times*, 21 June 2008.
5. Al-Fadli is a son of the last *sultan* of Abyan (one of the Aden Protectorate states absorbed into the South Yemeni republic) and one of Yemen's "Afghans" (i.e. those who joined the Afghan *mujabidin* during the 1980s in fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan). Tariq and other Afghans were accused of secreting arms for actions against the government and were besieged the hills of Abyan in 1992. After subsequently marrying into the Bayt al-Ahmar of Sanhan, al-Fadli appeared to have traded his radical Islamist goals for a more coopted role within al-Islah and especially the ruling General People's Congress (GPC). *al-Hayat* (London), 4 Jan. 1993; *Middle East Economic Digest*, 15 Jan. 1993; Paul Dresch and Bernard Haykel, "Stereotypes and Political Styles: Islamists and Tribesfolk in Yemen," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (1995), pp. 424-425; Sheila Carapico, "Yemen and the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army," *MERIP Press Information Notes*, No. 35 (18 October 2002), distributed electronically.
6. This has been reported by the blogger Jane Novak on her website <armiesofliberation.com>.
7. Shaun Overton, "Understanding the Second Houthi Rebellion in Yemen," Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 3, Issue 12 (17 June 2005), pp. 8-9.
8. One report alleged that President 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih provided al-Qadhafi with Yahya al-Huthi's telephone number in Germany in the belief that communications between the two would be intercepted by Saudi Arabian intelligence. It also added that the ROY government has played up its allegation of Iranian support for the Huthis in order to gain increased assistance from Riyadh. *Yemen Times*, 24 July 2008.
9. WorldPress.org, 15 July 2008.
10. <doctorswithoutborders.org>, 27 June 2008.
11. *Yemen Times*, 29 July 2008.
12. Haykel, "Zaydi Revival?" p. 20.
13. *Gulf News* (Bahrain), 1 May 2005
14. *al-Hayat* (London), 21 Feb. 2006.
15. *Reuters*, 27 June 2004; *Arab News* (Jiddah), 28 June 2004.

16. *Los Angeles Times*, 11 September 2004.

17. WorldPress.org, 15 July 2008.

18. *al-Hayat*, 7 May 2006.

19. *Reuters*, 6 July 2004; *Arab News*, 3 September 2004.

20. Note on Sources. Information regarding the conflict is extremely sparse and conflicting. ROY government efforts to embargo all news from the front and to restrict travel to Sa'dah province has resulted in an inevitable imbalance in reporting in favor of the government. The Huthis have had limited capability in projecting their side of the conflict, either through their lone spokesman Yahya al-Huthi in Germany or through peripatetic websites. The website of the Yemeni Socialist Party, <www.aleshteraki.net>, follows the conflict and contains news and views sympathetic to the Huthis, as does <armiesofliberation.com>. In addition to the sources cited in the footnotes, this note has been prepared primarily on the basis of media reporting, especially the international wire services Reuters, AP, UPI, AFP, and DPA, as well as Saba News Agency and Qatar News Agency. Other sources include in *Arab News* (Jiddah), *al-Watan* (Abha), *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), *BBC News* (London), *Middle East Online* (London), *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), *al-Hayat* (London), *Khaleej Times* (Dubai), *al-Khalij* (Sharjah), *The Peninsula* (Doha), *Gulf News* (Dubai), *The National* (Abu Dhabi), *al Arabiya.net* (Abu Dhabi), *al Jazeera.net* (Doha), *WorldPress.org*, and especially the *Yemen Times* and *Yemen Observer* (both of Sanaa).