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Yemen's Zaidis: A Window for Iranian Influence

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Brief Analysis

The receptiveness that many Yemeni Shiite leaders have shown toward Iran's foreign policy and religious practice give Tehran a ready means to expand its reach in Yemen.

The Houthi coup and other recent developments in Yemen have raised many questions about the country's religious fabric, especially the relationship between its large Zaidi community and Twelver Shia Islam, the main religion of Iran. The complex links connecting the two religious traditions have significant implications for the Houthis' internal politics, as well as their relations with Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and other Shiite entities in the Middle East.

AN OLD SHIITE BRANCH OF ISLAM

Unlike the majority of Muslims, who believe that Ali is the fourth caliph (successor) of the Prophet Muhammad, Shiites regard Ali as the first legitimate caliph and believe that his sons should have succeeded him. After Ali was assassinated in the seventh century, the Umayyad Dynasty arose and separated religious authority from political authority. That was not acceptable to his followers, the Shiites, who believed that rulers should be appointed by the Prophet or his successors and hold the highest spiritual qualifications.

In the early eighth century -- after the death of the fourth Shiite Imam (spiritual guide/political leader) Ali Ibn Hussein, not to be confused with the first Imam Ali -- Shiites began to splinter over succession. The faction known as the Zaidis chose Ali's son Zaid as the fifth Imam. Another faction -- who went on to become the Twelver Shiites, so named because they believe there are twelve Imams in all -- chose Ali's other son, Muhammad. One of the main reasons behind this split was that the Zaidis firmly believed that Shiites should rise up against the Umayyad Dynasty

and take revenge for the Battle of Karbala, the late seventh-century clash in which the third Shiite Imam Hussein had been killed. In contrast, the followers of Imam Muhammad believed that Umayyad suppression had made Shiites too vulnerable, so they needed to reorganize and work to empower the community until the day when the Mahdi (savior) would come and take revenge for Hussein by God's will.

After that schism, jihad and war against unjust rulers became an essential ingredient of belief for the Zaidis, who criticized Imam Muhammad and his followers for inaction against the Umayyad caliphs. Zaid rose up against the Umayyad ruler of the time and was killed in battle, becoming the martyr par excellence for Zaidis after Hussein. In essence, rebellion against unjust rulers became one of the central Zaidi qualifications for any legitimate political-spiritual leader.

The followers of Zaid and Muhammad gradually developed two distinct theological and juridical schools. At the same time, many Zaidis and Twelver Shiites left Medina and immigrated to Iran. In 897, a Zaidi named Yahya bin Hussein left Medina for Yemen, calling himself "Hadi" (the guide) and claiming to be an Imam. Like Zaid, he asserted that it was a religious duty to rise up against injustice, and that only a rebellious leader could be an Imam. Zaidis hold that Imams assume the position by consensus of the community's *ulama* (religious scholars), who in this case recognized Yahya bin Hussein's claim. By contrast, Twelver Shiites believe that one becomes Imam only by explicit appointment of the Prophet or previous Imam. Another divergence between the two approaches is that Zaidi jurisprudence is very close to two Sunni schools of Islamic law, the Hanafi and Shafi'i, which are significantly different from the Twelver Shiite school.

OVERTHROWING UNJUST RULERS

Despite ongoing persecution and imprisonment, none of the Twelver Imams after Hussein rose up against the political establishment. The traditional Twelver view continued to hold that establishing a religiously legitimate government should be postponed until the Mahdi's return. This view persisted during the Safavid dynasty, which established Shia Islam as the official religion of the area that would become modern Iran. Rather than agitating for a theocracy during this period, the Shiite *ulama* continued to recognize the monarchy's legitimacy. As late as the mid-twentieth century, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini himself wrote that "no Shiite jurist has said or wrote so far that we are the king or that the monarchy is our right...they never opposed the [political establishment] and never meant to subvert the government" (from his 1944 book *Kashfol Asrar*, or "Revelation of Secrets").

A decade later, however, Khomeini drastically changed his view and developed the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, which entails that only a Shiite jurist has the religious right to rule the country. Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, led by a Twelver Shiite jurist, was a theological surprise for Zaidis in Yemen because they had believed that such uprisings were what differentiated them from Twelvers. Subsequently, the Twelver branch became so appealing to Yemeni Shiites that many of them traveled to Iran to learn more about it, often at the Islamic Republic's invitation. In many cases they were attracted by Iran's foreign policy, particularly the regime's resistance against Israel via proxies such as Hezbollah.

Although the exact number of Twelver Shiites in Yemen today is unknown, unofficial sources indicate that they constitute more than 10 percent of the population. Because the former government led by Ali Saleh often accused rebellious Yemenis of leaving Zaidism and subordinating themselves to Iran, openly identifying as a Twelver was long considered dangerous. Today, many Yemeni Twelvers still dissemble about their adherence to that school, following the doctrine of *taqiyya*, or religiously permissible dissemblance. Yet in a 2010 interview with the author, Morteza Mohatwari, a leading Zaidi cleric who runs a seminary in Sana, stated that very little now separates Twelvers from Zaidis in terms of their political theology (as opposed to their styles of jurisprudence, which remain different). In his view, Zaidis who "convert" actually believe that the Iranian regime's version of Twelver Shiism is the true Zaidism because it mobilizes the masses to confront foreign powers and unjust rulers.

HOUTHIS AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

In recent decades, Sadah, an historically Zaidi region in north Yemen, has rejuvenated its seminaries and religious institutions. Beginning in 1990, two Zaidi figures from this region -- Badr al-Din al-Houthi and his son Hussein, the leaders of the al-Haq (Right/Truth) Party -- came to prominence as the main ideologues of a religio-political movement whose followers have become known as Houthis. In 1992, Hussein founded the group al-Shabab al-Momen ("Young believers," also known as the Ansar Allah Movement) to fight the government.

Although both men have since died, the Houthi movement still bears their ideological imprint. In their publications, speeches, and seminars, Badr and Hussein showed obvious sympathy toward Twelver Shiism and Khomeini's revolutionary anti-American agenda. Hussein believed that the main conflict in Yemen is between Zaidis and Wahhabis; as he stated in remarks directed at the government sometime after the United States began providing counterterrorism assistance to Sana, "These are terrorists that you did not allow us to fight against; you stand behind them, and at the same time you let Americans come to Yemen under the pretext of fighting them." In addition, he was fascinated by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah; in one undated speech he asked the audience, "Did any of you see Hassan Nasrallah on the TV shaking Israel by his powerful words?" He also publicly praised Khomeini for his confrontational attitude toward the United States and Israel. In remarks criticizing Yemenis for not participating in one of the annual demonstrations that Iran organizes in Mecca during the Hajj, he said, "Imam Khomeini has understood Hajj in its Quranic sense...Therefore, he guided Iranians to shout against America, pagans, and Israel." In broader terms, he repeatedly criticized not only Yemenis, but also Arabs in general for not choosing Khomeini as an example for political leadership.

Al-Haq's current leader, Hassan Zaid, is close to Hezbollah as well -- a link at least partly explained by the fact that one of his three wives is a Lebanese woman who runs his office and manages his international relations. In a recent interview with the author he said, "We believe that Khomeini was a true Zaidi. Theologically our differences with Hezbollah and the Iranian government are minor, but politically we are identical."

According to the aforementioned Zaidi cleric Morteza Mohatwari, Iran's government and clerical institutions -- including those affiliated with leading Shiite clerics Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Javad Shahrastani in Qom -- provide religious training and educational tools to Yemenis in both countries. During a trip to Iran last month, Mohatwari asked for financial and educational support from the University of Religions and Denominations, an organization created thirteen years ago under Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's supervision to train non-Twelver Shiites and Twelvers who want to study other branches of Islam. A few weeks prior, Iran had invited Mohatwari and seventy other Yemeni Zaidi leaders to visit the shrine of Nasr al-Haq, a ninth-century Zaidi Imam, in northern Iran. Khamenei had ordered the shrine's renovation to reinforce the ties between Yemen and Iran, according to remarks made in 2014 by Sattar Alizadeh, head of the Endowment and Charity Organization of Mazandaran province. When Mohatwari visited the shrine last October, he said, "Having relations with Iran's Supreme Leader is an honor for Yemen...Now we know him more than Nasr al-Haq."

The connection between Yemen and Iran was further emphasized in an important interview aired on January 27 by Fars News Agency, an outlet affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. During the discussion, Abdul Majid al-Houthi -- Badr al-Din's cousin and leader of the Ansar Allah Movement, which is now the official name for the overall Houthi movement -- declared the following: "Ansar Allah expects the Islamic Republic of Iran and other countries to support them and the Yemeni people...The revolution in Yemen...is inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran...but the intellectual and historical roots of revolution in Yemen stem from the fact that Yemenis are Zaidis and have more political experience than the Islamic Republic. From Ali's son, Imam Zaid up to now, Zaidis have witnessed many revolutions against unjust rulers."

IMPLICATIONS FOR IRANIAN POLICY

The Iranian regime's regional policy is not purely sectarian. In his address to the attendees of the January 9 Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran, Ayatollah Khamenei stated, "The Islamic Republic's assistance to its Muslim brothers has mostly been given to Sunnis. We have stood beside the Palestinians. We have helped Hamas and Islamic Jihad and will continue to help" (interestingly, the last sentence was deleted from the transcription of the speech on Khamenei's official website). In general this seems to be true -- Iran tends to conduct its foreign policy based on ideology, not theology. But this does not prevent the regime from using Shiism as a soft-power tool or mobilizing Shiites in the Middle East to threaten the West's interests and allies. The receptiveness that many Zaidi leaders have shown toward Iran's foreign policy and its practice of Twelver Shiism gives Tehran a ready means to expand its influence in Yemen.

Mehdi Khalaji, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, trained in the seminaries of Qom from 1986 to 2000. ❖



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