

The 1968 Siege of Sana: A Houthi Historical Parallel

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Brief Analysis

Locals tend to perceive today's conflict less as a struggle between external forces than as a continuation of long-running tensions between Zaydi tribal elite and the modern Yemeni state.

The beginning of November saw Sana's airport, government buildings, universities, and even major city intersections firmly under the control of the antigovernment Houthi movement. Since the 1990s, the Houthi clan has gained the support of many northern Zadyi tribes, adherents of Yemen's branch of Shia Islam, which comprises around 30 percent of the country's population of 25 million. The attack on Sana caps a decade of armed political struggle between the tribesmen of the Houthi movement and the Yemeni government.

For its part, the foreign media has portrayed the Houthi rebellion in global terms of religious sectarianism, Iranian foreign policy, and al-Qaeda, while largely ignoring local Yemeni factors. Behind the Houthi rebellion, however, lies a long history of Zaydi minority religious rule over the Sunni majority in Yemen and decades of opposition to the modern Yemeni government. Reflecting back on the 1968 siege of Sana provides historic insight into the current assault on the city.

The Siege: Buildup and Aftermath

On September 26, 1962, the Yemeni imam Muhammad al-Badr, from the Zaydi clan of Hamid al-Din, was overthrown by a group of military officers who founded what is now recognized as the modern Yemeni republic, marking the end to more than a thousand years of Zaydi religious rule in Yemen. The deposed imam fled northward and gathered a coalition of Zaydi tribes to form an armed opposition to the republic. Over the next six years, a dozen different countries and organizations intervened in the Yemeni civil war in an attempt to influence the outcome in one direction or another. The seventy-day siege of Sana in 1968 by the imam's northern tribes marked the war's culmination.

Prior to the siege, most of the political elite had fled Sana, leaving behind a weakened central government with only a few thousand soldiers to defend the capital. Despite overwhelming odds against the republic's survival, the city was saved by a combination of timely Soviet airlifts and a series of battlefield miscalculations by the imam's generals.

The defense of Sana became the defining moment in the Yemeni republic's modern history. A generation of Yemeni politicians, including former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, claim to have been among the defenders of the capital city in 1968, counting themselves as national heroes.

After six years of fighting, tens of thousands of total casualties, and untold sums of money, the Yemeni republic emerged from the civil war as a weak state reliant on foreign support for its continued existence. The Soviet Union had invested the most money and political capital in supporting the new republic during the 1960s by financing the construction of new naval and airports, underwriting an Egyptian army of occupation that numbered 70,000, and carrying out the risky airlifts to save the capital city in 1968. After the main hostilities had subsided, Pavel Demchenko, the senior Middle East correspondent for the Soviet newspaper Pravda, made arguably the keenest observation of the entire conflict: September 1962 was not a revolution but rather "a centuries-old method of Yemeni regime change." The Soviets had perceived Yemen through the prism of regional Arab nationalist trends and a global conflict and had failed to comprehend the civil war's local nature.

The Houthi Political Plan: A Return to the Imamate?

In September of this year, the Houthis, following the precedent set by the last Zaydi imam, descended on the capital city with the express intention of challenging the modern Yemeni republic. Today's images of Houthi tribesmen in traditional Yemeni dress brandishing weapons and ammunition as they near the city's gates echo those from the 1968 siege. Indeed, the tradition of sieges of the city dates back as early as the fifth century, when the Sasanian Empire enacted such a siege. Also central to the tradition of targeting the capital city as a means of bringing down the state was permission granted to loyal tribesman, upon victory, to loot the city as payment for their military service. Today, discussions with Sana residents indicate fears that Houthi looting and intimidation may foretell further violence. Those who personally recall the 1968 siege say they half expect to see, as they did four decades ago, the heads of rebels or collaborators adorning the gates of the city's main marketplace.

The historic parallels between the Houthi rebellion and the former Zaydi imam's tribal forces of the 1960s go beyond mere conjecture. The Houthi family leadership claims legitimacy as members of the *sayyed* class, or direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. The select families belonging to this lineage constitute a form of limited nobility in Yemen, with many of them marrying only within the *sayyed* class. The current Houthi leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, belongs to a *sayyed* family and, despite his youthful age of thirty-two, studiously flaunts his title, following the practice of his father, grandfather, and brothers. More than an indicator of nobility, *sayyed* status is an essential criterion for becoming imam. Although official Houthi media and publications deny any intentions of restoring the Yemeni imamate, it is well known in Yemeni society that members of the *sayyed* class harbor visions of restoring a religious leadership and resuming hierarchical supremacy.

The Houthi resurgence began during the 1990s with a program of Zaydi religious education that was seen as a challenge to the secular Yemeni government and to Saudi influence on Yemeni society. This program, alongside a platform advocating equal rights for all Yemenis and an end to the state's political corruption, has generated popular support for the Houthi opposition. During the street protests of 2011, Houthi representatives sat alongside Yemeni students in Sana's Tahrir Square calling for President Saleh's resignation and extensive government reform. As the central government grew weaker and the opposition movement grew stronger, members of the Houthi leadership began advocating a more ambitious political agenda and military expansion aimed at asserting their tribal power over the current government. In the two years since Saleh's 2012 resignation, massive Houthi protests have devolved into a new phase of armed conflict with the Yemeni government, with Houthi troops advancing southward from their tribal stronghold in the north, reaching Sana by September 2014.

The contemporary defenders of Sana and the entirety of the Yemeni republic cannot rely on today's U.S. targeted

strikes or the Soviet airlifts of 1968. Further, they are faced with the difficulty of prolonging a republic with declining support and validity against a popular religious alternative. Adding to the intrigue, the former imam's grandson Muhammad Hamid al-Din returned from exile in Saudi Arabia to Houthi-controlled Sana on October 26, purportedly at the behest of Houthi officials. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi and the rest of his tribe understand that, in a country dominated by tribal loyalties, a religiously ordained government has significantly more authority and legitimacy than a secular republic. Yemenis would certainly not be surprised if Abdul-Malik or the former imam's grandson, supported by a Zaydi tribal religious council, claims the right to the Yemeni imamate, thus restoring a system of rule that had governed this southern Arabian country for centuries.

U.S. Policy Implications

However much regional states and foreign media may read the Houthi rebellion as part of a sectarian struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia or as a symptom of the spread of religious extremism, locals are more likely to perceive the conflict as the continuation of decades of political tensions between Zaydi tribal elite and the modern Yemeni state. U.S. officials should be careful not to repeat the mistakes of Soviet officials during the 1960s by intervening in a conflict that could be understood, with the passage of time, as simply "a centuries-old method of Yemeni regime change." While even traditional methods of regime change in Yemen often involved some level of foreign intervention, Yemenis are more likely to consider the Houthi assault on Sana by reflecting on the 1968 historical precedent rather than the intentions of an outside power. Any lasting resolution of the conflict must first recognize the role of Zaydi religious elite within the country's history and in the identity of the common citizen.

Asher Orkaby received his PhD in Middle East history from Harvard University and is currently a junior research fellow at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies. He is the author of a forthcoming book on the international history of Yemen's civil war (1962-1968). ❖

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