

BOWLES'S NEW AND ACCURATE MAP OF THE WORLD, OR TERRESTRIAL GLOBE, laid down from the BEST OBSERVATIONS and NEWEST DISCOVERIES; particularly those of the celebrated CIRCUMNAVIGATORS: Illustrated with a variety of useful PROJECTIONS and REPRESENTATIONS of the HEAVENLY BODIES: the most approved ASTRONOMICAL and GEOGRAPHICAL DEFINITIONS, TABLES, and PROBLEMS. With an easy and familiar Explanation of the most curious and interesting PHENOMENA in the UNIVERSAL SYSTEM.



Yemen: The Huthi March to Sana'a

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Open Source, Foreign Perspective, Underconsidered/Understudied Topics

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YEMEN: THE HUTHI MARCH TO SANA'A

Lucas Winter

In June 2013 Yemen's Huthi Movement held an elaborate multi-day ceremony to re-entomb the group's founder Hussein al-Huthi. Yemeni government forces had shot and killed al-Huthi in a nearby cave nearly nine years earlier, and had only recently handed over his remains, as an enticement for his followers to participate in Yemen's transitional political process. The gesture worked, and the Huthis soon joined other Yemeni political factions at the table of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which was to establish a political system to rule Yemen following the two-year transitional period that had begun in February 2012. The Huthis participated reluctantly, arguing that the NDC was rigged against them and in favor of entities backed by Saudi Arabia and the United States.

The Huthis were Yemen's best-armed and organized non-state actor. They controlled most of Saada Province and surrounding territories, and had activists and supporters throughout the country. They had extended and solidified their reach, often by force, in the 18 months after the November 2011 forced resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, which had created a power vacuum in several parts of the country. Many factions in the NDC distrusted the Huthis, in particular the Sunni Party Islah, which was the main supporter of the tribal militias against which the Huthis had been fighting since Saleh's resignation.

The NDC drew to a fractious close in January 2014. The Huthis refused to endorse the final proposals and withdrew.¹ The transitional government's foreign backers, mainly Saudi Arabia and the UN, had no plan to prevent Yemen from going adrift.² The transitional

government's mandate had expired, but there was nothing to take its place. Interim President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi stayed in office, and what remained of the weak Yemeni state teetered along on a slow downward spiral.

The collapse of the NDC created a new power vacuum that the Huthis eventually filled. On 21 September 2014, almost exactly nine months after the end of the NDC, Huthi militants seized the capital. Hadi and what remained of his government and supporters agreed to form a "national salvation" government with the Huthis, effectively ceding the reins of power to the movement. The Huthi takeover of Sana'a would not have been possible absent the political vacuum created by the breakdown of the NDC. Yet the Huthi march to Sana'a was more than a functional response to state collapse.

The Huthis, who are also known as "Ansar Allah," originated in the 1980s as a religious revivalist movement targeting aggrieved segments of Yemen's socially stratified northern highlands, in particular the rural underclass and the Hashemite upper class.³ Initially known as the "Believing Youth," the movement was in part a reaction to fears that Salafi-Wahhabi ideas were taking hold among the marginalized populations of Yemen's Zaydi heartland, especially the youth. Like the Salafists, the Huthis developed a clear and concise message, rooted in an accessible and practical interpretation of Koranic texts that could appeal to a devout yet disaffected youth. In contrast to the rigid intolerance of Salafi-Wahhabism, the Zaydi revivalist message was pragmatic and rooted in contemporary issues.

The group's growth into a political movement critical of the Yemeni government began toward the end of the 1990s under the guidance of Hussein al-Huthi, the intelligent and charismatic son of an Islamic scholar who was among the movement's founders. Al-Huthi's message took a strong stance against the Yemeni government's friendly relations with the United States and Saudi Arabia, arguing that the Saleh government prioritized the needs of foreign allies over those of the Yemeni population and as a result was unjust. In Zaydi dogma, speaking out against unjust rulers is a fundamental action to be undertaken by those seeking to lead the Muslim community.

By the early 2000s, al-Huthi and his followers had become vocal in their criticism of the president and his policies. Tensions gradually escalated until Yemeni military forces hunted down al-Huthi in a cave near his base in the remote Marran Mountain of Saada Province. Immediately after Hussein al-Huthi's death, his followers began an insurgency and for several years they fought the Yemeni Armed Forces to a standstill. In 2009 they nearly pushed Yemeni military units across the border into Saudi Arabia, but the kingdom quickly intervened with several weeks of airstrikes and a subsequent negotiated ceasefire. When protests calling for the overthrow of Ali Abdullah Saleh began in February 2011, the Huthis mobilized thousands of their followers in the Yemeni capital and other parts of the country. In Sana'a and other semi-urban areas, the Huthis established protest camps and marched through city streets calling for regime change; in rural areas they proselytized heavily and seized territory by force, particularly in areas abandoned by the government.

Huthi strength was on display at the June 2013 dedication of Hussein al-Huthi's shrine. Al-Huthi's re-entombment ceremony marked the first time that Huthi militiamen wore ceremonial military uniforms. 20,000 Huthi militants were deployed to secure the event.⁴ Despite difficult access, tens if not hundreds of thousands of people trekked up to the remote location. VIP guests included leaders and dignitaries from the influential tribes of Yemen's northern highlands, politicians from ex-president Saleh's political party (the General People's Congress [GPC]), and representatives from Yemen's important Hashemite families. Those who had embraced Salafi-Wahhabism were not invited, nor were militants from the Sunni Islah Party. The ceremony distilled Huthi strengths into a single performance, showing how they constituted a capable military-security force with deep political linkages throughout Yemeni society and the ability to mobilize on a mass scale in Yemen's rural areas.

By the end of the 2000s the Huthis had acquired a reputation for military prowess, having survived several rounds of intense fighting with both tribal militias and the Yemeni armed forces.⁵ Estimates of Huthi manpower and weaponry are hard to come by and not always reliable. According to a June 2013 article, the group had half a million followers, of which 30,000 had been trained in various military skills over the previous three years.⁶ A more conservative estimate from November 2014 put the number of well trained hardcore fighters at between 3,000-5,000, with a total of 10,000 regular active fighters that could double in number depending on the number of active fronts.⁷

The group has obtained weapons from a variety of sources including smuggling, overrunning military positions, purchases from Yemen's markets, illicit transfers from military

stockpiles, local production, and foreign suppliers. Huthi capabilities have gradually increased since their insurgency first began in 2004. Especially in later rounds of fighting, the Yemeni Republican Guard is believed to have provided the Huthis with advanced weaponry despite the two being declared adversaries. According to a 2010 study, Huthi armaments include assault rifles, medium and heavy (12.7-mm) machine guns, RPGs, 90-mm recoilless rifles, and repurposed 23-mm antiaircraft cannons. The Huthis rely heavily on “technicals” and also have APCs, including M-113s taken from the government, as well as T-55/62 tanks.⁸

The Huthis appear to have armed themselves from a variety of sources during the immediate post-Saleh period. In early 2013 a weapons shipment was seized off the Yemeni coast, allegedly destined for the Huthis. It included MANPADS, ammunition, RPG-7 launchers, Katyusha rockets, blocks of C-4 explosive, night-vision goggles and laser range finders.⁹ Comparable shipments likely did reach the Huthis during this period. While advancing toward Sana’a in the summer of 2014, the Huthis picked up tanks and heavy artillery after overrunning the Yemeni Army’s 310th Brigade in Amran. Upon taking over the capital in September they gained access to stockpiles from the Yemeni Armed Forces and could import weapons through Sana’a International Airport and the port of Hodeidah. Since Saudi Arabian intervention began in March 2015, the Huthis have added extensive use of ATGMs and artillery rockets to their fighting doctrine. In alliance with supportive units in the Yemeni military, they have launched several ballistic missiles against targets in both Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Huthi strength is as much political as military. Shifting alliances and divide-and-rule tactics have driven much of Yemen’s history, and the Huthis were able to exploit shared enmity

toward certain factions in the Islah Party to their advantage. During the transitional process they became tacit allies with loyalists of ex-President Saleh, their sworn adversaries from the prior decade. This alliance gave them access to the broad patronage network of the ex-president's political party (the GPC) as well as influence throughout Yemen's state institutions. With support from Saleh and his backers, the Huthis were able to drive a wedge within Islah by forging alliances and non-aggression pacts with important components of the Hashid Confederation, until then Yemen's most politically important tribal grouping. The Huthis were also able to rally the support of Yemen's Hashemite community, which had for long been divided in its stance toward the movement. Support of Yemen's Hashemites gave the Huthis added credibility both in Sana'a and throughout Yemen's historically Zaydi communities. It also solidified their access to important levers of power, both material and symbolic.

The Huthis leveraged the anti-government activism of the Arab Spring to bolster their ranks and expand their appeal. Having spent decades using a religiously infused, anti-status quo message to recruit from Yemen's rural underclass, the Huthis had a message that could easily channel the anti-government feelings expressed by the malcontent urban masses spearheading protest throughout the region.¹⁰ Huthi decrying of a rigged process found further resonance after the "Youth Movement" that had driven the protest movement was sidelined from the transitional process' renegotiation of power. Throughout the protests of 2011 and in contrast to other factions from former North Yemen, the Huthis remained consistent in their critique of the political system, whether under Ali Abdullah Saleh or the transitional government.

The Huthis' road to Sana'a began with an effort to establish undisputed control over their Saada stronghold. A strategic pillar of the movement's growth over the prior three decades had been controlling the mosques. Following government retrenchment from the provinces in 2011, the Huthis moved to put imams under their control throughout the mosques of Saada Province.¹¹ Their largest obstacle to achieving this lay a few miles southeast of the provincial capital, in the village of Dammaj, home to a Salafist school named "Dar al-Hadith." The school and the mosques under its control were not only outside of Huthi control, but they were also among the movement's most vocal critics. Dar al-Hadith had been founded in the 1970s by a Saudi returnee from Dammaj named Muqbil al-Wadai. Al-Wadai's school drew students from throughout the world, including a handful that went on to become semi-famous in the annals of global jihadism. For decades, the Huthis and the Salafists of Dar al-Hadith had engaged in polemics about one another's doctrinal deviance. These occasionally devolved into armed clashes, but were always resolved through mediation based on longstanding Yemeni tribal traditions.

Amidst the power vacuum of late 2011, the Huthis accused the Salafists of arming themselves. After they encircled Dar al-Hadith and the adjacent village, government-backed tribal mediation successfully defused the situation. Tensions remained, though, and in October 2013 the Huthis again encircled the area and began shelling it from above. Although armed and able to communicate with the outside world, the Salafists were overmatched in numbers, equipment, weapons and position. Amidst a war of words, the Salafists and townspeople resisted for several months, with 2,000 of them allegedly killed or injured.¹² Despite blustery promises, Islah tribal militias were unable to approach the area, much less break the siege. In January 2014

the Salafists of Dammaj agreed to a negotiated evacuation of the area, which came under full Huthi control.

Concurrent with the siege of Dammaj, the Huthis opened several other fronts against Salafists and militias linked to the Islah Party in or near the Huthis' Saada strongholds.¹³ As they moved to consolidate control over Yemen's traditional Zaydi territories, the Huthis tweaked their strategy to suit the particularities of a given area. The communities they targeted were often experiencing some level of strife as a result of the country's broader political vacuum. In some cases Huthi envoys entered as mediators, leveraging their status as Hashemites to establish order and working to spread the group's message and recruit new followers. In other cases they supported particular factions, descending brazenly and unexpectedly into communities under control of pro-Islah factions.¹⁴ Huthi advances often involved a combination of bunkering on high ground, proselytizing in the community, helping resolve local conflicts, and setting up checkpoints.¹⁵

By leveraging communal rifts the Huthis were able to eventually drive a wedge in the Hashid confederation, Yemen's powerful tribal grouping which had often been in conflict with Huthi allies. Members of Hashid were the backbone of the Islah Party, and its key financiers and supporters were the al-Ahmar brothers, whose father and grandfather had both led the Hashid Confederation until the father's death in 2007. Like the Huthis, the al-Ahmar brothers had supported anti-Saleh protests in 2011. After Saleh's resignation they and their allies in Hashid became key backers of the transitional process. Their fortunes began fading when Saudi Arabia

withdrew support for Islah in 2013 and precipitously declined with the collapse of the NDC in early 2014.

In February 2014, the Huthis signed a non-aggression pact with several factions of the Hashid Confederation.¹⁶ The agreement stripped the al-Ahmars of control over the confederation. The following month the Huthis marched into the heart of the al-Ahmar family territories (al-Khamir), easily overpowering guards and burning down the tribal leaders' stately mansions. By the summer of 2014 Hashid's traditional leadership and the Islah Party were ghosts of their former selves, the first defeated politically and militarily and the second remaining relevant only through its influence on the increasingly unpopular government, which was kept afloat by tepid international support and an absence of viable alternatives. An article in Yemen's *al-Wasat* newspaper describes the fall of Hashid's traditional leadership as no less than "the collapse of the tribal system."¹⁷

The largest population center in the Hashid heartland is the town of Amran, located further south along the Saada-Sana'a highway and home to the Yemeni Army's 310th Armored Brigade. The 310th was linked to the 1st Armored Division, whose leader Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar had abandoned the Saleh regime in March 2011. The transitional process and the deal to weaken Saleh had also weakened Ali Muhsin, who was an ally of the Islah Party and of the transitional government. He and Saleh both belonged to the Sanhan tribe, which was nominally a member of the Hashid confederation. Like Hashid itself, Sanhan was divided.

The Huthi takeover of Amran began with a civilian encirclement of the town, using “protest camps” to block the town’s northern entrance. This was followed by disruptive activities in the form of regular marches calling for the resignation of the governor and the 310th’s commander. When their demands were not met the Huthis blocked all other entrance points to Amran and encircled the 310th Brigade, whose commander refused to leave even though the governor capitulated and resigned. The ministry of defense in Sana’a ignored the 310th’s requests for reinforcements, and the government instead sent in a team of mediators who treated the conflict as between the Huthis and Islah and not directly involving the government.¹⁸ A military detachment was eventually deployed nearby, but this force kept its distance and also refused to take sides; when Yemen’s defense minister visited the area to seek a peaceful resolution he met with Huthi commanders but not with leaders of the 310th.

Islah supporters viewed government actions in Amran as evidence that the Huthis had infiltrated and gained control over the defense ministry and other state institutions. Shortly after a de-escalation plan involving the handover of the 310th’s weapons to the military police was to be implemented, the Huthis attacked and overran the brigade. They captured and killed its leader, a high-ranking commander close to Ali Muhsin who had previously led government forces against the Huthis. The Huthis hauled away the 310th’s heavy weapons, including tanks and artillery pieces, and distributed them to fronts throughout the country.

Even after the fall of Amran, there were doubts about whether the Huthis would seek to advance on Sana’a.¹⁹ In contrast to other areas the Huthis had seized, Sana’a was well guarded from all angles. Islah members were nominally in control of the capital, but remnants of the

Saleh regime were militarily dominant via the Yemeni Republican Guard (YRG), which despite a restructured command remained largely loyal to the ex-president. The YRG had heavy weapons overlooking the capital's entry points and could conceivably repel a Huthi incursion. Rather than go in with guns blazing, the Huthis entered Sana'a gradually, replicating their strategy in Amran on a larger scale.

The key tactic by which the Huthis took over the Yemeni capital was establishing "protest camps" in key nodes of the city. Ever since Yemen's 2011 Arab Spring, the Huthis had regularly used popular mobilization as a tool for political change. Protest camps were a legacy of the tent cities that had been set up in Yemen's main squares by protesters and counter-protesters throughout 2011. They were a means of encircling facilities and establishing checkpoints into the capital, while at the same time placing direct pressure on governmental authorities by making it virtually impossible to carry out regular duties.

The protest camps did not appear in a vacuum, but rather emerged after the Hadi government announced fuel subsidy cuts, exacerbating what was already an extremely depressed economic situation for most Yemenis. The government was operating on borrowed time since the inconclusive end to the NDC, and it was increasingly unable to provide services or make coherent decisions.²⁰ For many Yemenis, either the government's wealthy foreign backers had turned their backs on it, or the government of technocrats was no less corrupt than what they had replaced.

In a speech shortly after the announced subsidy cuts, Huthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Huthi threatened to topple the government unless two conditions were immediately met: the formation of a new, more inclusive government and the rescinding of the subsidy cuts. Opposition to the cuts was widespread, and many Yemenis who otherwise opposed the Huthis likely sympathized with this position. Al-Huthi outlined a plan of gradual escalation that would be used to seize power, and several important Yemeni tribes - or at least factions within them - announced their support for the Huthis and their position.²¹ Members of the GPC party and other capital residents fed up with the government joined in as well.²²

The Huthi camps were strategically placed. In late August 2014, they set up four camps at the capital's northern entrance, close to the international airport and adjacent military installations.²³ Another set of protest camps went up in the upscale Hisbah neighborhood, near ministries and wealthy residences. Further camps were erected at the southern entrance to the capital, surrounding the sprawling YRG compound. Huthi supporters began disrupting the flow of the city, blocking the airport road as well as the ministries of interior, transport and electricity. In less than a month, they had encircled the capital and brought it to a virtual standstill.

The Huthis took several measures concurrent with the expansion of the protests camps, including going door-to-door requesting donations,²⁴ demanding that residents allow their gunmen to take positions on roofs,²⁵ storming certain areas by force of arms,²⁶ and arresting Islah activists. Security forces unsuccessfully sought to clear the camp surrounding the compound housing the defense, interior, transport, and electricity ministries.²⁷ The situation gradually escalated, as protesters encroaching on government facilities were shot and killed, drawing a

response from Huthi forces.²⁸ On 15 September, most airlines halted trips into Sana'a airport due to a Huthi blockade.²⁹ YRG and other praetorian forces deployed in Sana'a were unable or unwilling to stop the Huthi takeover.

The fall of the capital was swift. Following clashes in several areas to the capital's northeast, the Huthis seized the TV station area and the military HQ where Ali Muhsin had been based.³⁰ Their only military obstacle to taking the city was what remained of Ali Muhsin's 1st Armored Division, and once they took it the rest of the city fell quickly.³¹ Forces loyal to ex-president Saleh, as well as the bulk of Yemen's military, declared itself neutral. The nominal head of Yemen's top forces issued a statement expressing neutrality and hopes for a political resolution to what some still viewed as an Islah-Huthi conflict.

The Huthis had influence in the military and security forces, though it is hard to discern the extent to which this played a role in the fall of Sana'a. The country's most capable military and security forces refused to fully intervene on behalf of the transitional government. Even if there had been a will to break up the protest camps, it is not clear that the state military and security apparatus had the capacity and coherence to do so. With Huthi sympathizers blocking all entrances to the capital, the government could not rely on reinforcements from the surrounding tribal areas to defend Sana'a.

The Huthi march to Sana'a was military at its core, but it relied on elements much deeper than mere firepower superiority. Most important was a deep understanding of Yemen's human geography, which allowed the Huthis to leverage proselytism, political alliances, and mass

mobilization in a way that complemented, and often substituted, the use of armed force to seize and control territory. Huthi strategy has always emphasized the grassroots, a bottom-up approach that is not solely about projecting military power nor about leveraging political connections, but is instead based on a strong recruitment pitch through which the group has since 2011 mobilized more people for a sustained period than any other political group in Yemen. Huthi opponents often describe their takeover of Sana'a as a coup, with the implication that military force and backstage machinations were what put the Huthis in power. This characterization may be politically expedient but it is analytically weak, especially since it overlooks the centrality of messaging and mass mobilization, not only to the group's takeover of the Yemeni government but to their organizational identity writ large.

¹ Huthi representative Ahmed Sharaf al-Din was murdered before the final session. He was the second prominent Huthi representative to be murdered during the NDC. Sharaf al-Din's murder notwithstanding, the Huthis had rejected the blueprint for Yemen's political future, arguing that the proposed new administrative division of the country was meant to deliberately weaken them.

² Shortly after the NDC began Saudi Arabia turned against its main Yemeni partner, the Islah Party, a Sunni-tribal coalition linked to the regional Muslim Brotherhood Movement. Islah had in many ways kept the transitional process afloat.

³ Hashemite are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his grandsons Hussein and Hassan. Under the Zaydi political system which has ruled much of Yemen's north for over a millennium, leadership of the Yemeni Imamate goes to a Hashemite who is an able fighter and learned Islamic scholar. In much of Yemen, the Hashemites continue to enjoy a privileged social status.

⁴ "The Huthis Bury the Remains of The Group's Founder and Leader Hussein al-Huthi in a Military Ceremony Attended by Large Crowds." *Yemen Press*. 6 June 2013 (Arabic). <https://yemen-press.com/news19704.html>

⁵ While the Huthis were fighting against an important part of the Yemeni Army (the 1st Armored Division), they also received help from other factions within the Yemeni military (the Republican Guard).

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