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Responses to Information Requests

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9 September 2015

YEM105277.E

Yemen: Relationship and treatment of Hashemites by authorities and other groups, including Houthis [Huthis] and extremist groups (2012-August 2015)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview of Hashemites in Yemen

Sources state that the Hashemites are descendants from the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad (Human Rights Watch Oct. 2008, 2; International Crisis Group 10 June 2014, 1; Associate Professor 24 Aug. 2015). Human Rights Watch explains that in Yemen,

[b]oth Sunnis and Shi'a [Shiite] use the term Hashemite to refer to direct descendants of the Prophet Mohamed's grandfather. Sayyids are a sub-group of Hashemites although the terms are often used interchangeably. Not all branches of Islam agree on when the prophet's family tree stopped expanding and who is therefore a direct descendant (a Hashemite). (Nov. 2008, 7)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor of geography at Towson University whose research specializes in the Middle East and contemporary Yemeni society and politics, stated that to be considered a Hashemite, for the Shi'a Muslims in Yemen, one's familial lineage must be "from the family of Fatima and Ali," whereas for Sunni Muslims, "descent from the broader family counts" (24 Aug. 2015).

According to sources, Hashemites can be Sunni or Shi'a (Human Rights Watch Oct. 2008, 11; International Crisis Group 10 June 2014, 1).

Sources indicate that the Hashemite population in Yemen is seven (The Maghreb and Orient Courier Mar. 2015) or twelve percent of the total population (*Yemen Times* 18 Dec. 2014).

According to Human Rights Watch, Hashemites in Yemen are most commonly of the Zaydi [Zaidi] branch of Shi'a Islam (Human Rights Watch Oct. 2008, 11). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Michigan, who has conducted research on Islam-based movements in Yemen, stated that in northern Yemen the majority of Hashemite families are Shi'a of the Zaydi school (Professor of Islamic Studies 21 Aug. 2015).

International Crisis Group explains that "not all Yemeni Hashemites are Zaydi; some are Sunni" (10 June 2014, 1). Similarly, the Professor of Islamic Studies stated that there are some Hashemites on the northern coastal areas of Yemen who are Sunni (Professor of Islamic Studies 21 Aug. 2015). The Professor of Islamic Studies further stated that in the south, the majority of Hashemites are Sunnis who are of the Shafi'i [Shafii] school (ibid.).

Sources state that Zyadi Shi'aism is close in practice to Sunni Islam (Al-Monitor 15 Sept. 2014; Reuters 20 May 2015). Sunni Islam, specifically the Shafi'i branch, is the majority order of Islam in Yemen (*Yemen*

Times 27 Feb. 2014; US 28 July 2014, 2). Sources report that about 35 percent of Yemenis are Zaydi (Elcano Royal Institute 24 Mar. 2015; US 28 July 2015, 2) and about 65 percent are Sunni of the Shafi branch (*ibid.*). Sources report that Zaydi are mainly located in Hajja, Dhamer [Dammār], Sana'a [Sanaa] (International Crisis Group 10 June 2014, 1; *Yemen Times* 27 Feb. 2014), Amran, and Sa'dah [Sadaa], which is considered the Zaydi "heartland" (*ibid.*).

According to sources, strict interpretations of Zaydism hold that the imam must be a Hashemite (Human Rights Watch Oct. 2008, 11; Associate Professor 23 Aug. 2015) or *sayyid* [*sada*], a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (Human Rights Watch Nov. 2008, 7). According to Human Rights Watch, the imam serves as both a religious and secular leader (*ibid.*, 11). Sources state that Zaydi Hashemites ruled Northern Yemen for a thousand years and that the Imamate was overthrown during the 1962 revolution (*ibid.*, 11; *The Majalla* 10 Oct. 2009). Sources state that under the imamate, Hashemites formed the ruling political class (Human Rights Watch Oct. 2008, 11; Associate Professor 23 Aug. 2015) or had high social standing in society (Professor of Islamic Studies 21 Aug. 2015). Sources state that after the 1962 revolution, there were efforts to reduce the Hashemites' political and social power (Professor of Islamic Studies 21 Aug. 2015; Associate Professor 23 Aug. 2015). *The Majalla* magazine, an English and Arabic-language political affairs publication on the Arab world (*The Majalla* n.d.), similarly reports that after the 1962 revolution and the end of the Imamate, there was an "alteration in the social order that had dominated Yemen in the past. ... the region inhabited by the Zaydis has undergone systematic political and economic marginalization" (*The Majalla* 10 Oct. 2009).

2. Relationship Between Hashemites and Houthis

According to sources, the Houthi movement is also referred to as Ansar Allah (*Yemen Times* 27 Feb. 2014; Holzapfel Mar. 2014, 10). Sources further state that the Houthi movement began with the founding of the "Believing Youth" movement in the 1990s, which was intended to revive Zaydi Islam in response to the growth of Salafist Sunni Islam in the North (*ibid.*; Human Rights Watch Oct. 2008, 2; Associate Professor 23 Aug. 2015). Sources state that the Houthi movement first came into armed conflict with the government in 2004 (Al-Monitor 15 Sept. 2014; BBC 26 Mar. 2015; Holzapfel Mar. 2014, 10), when the Houthi group took up arms (*ibid.*; BBC 26 Mar. 2015). According to the BBC, the first Houthi uprising occurred in order to gain greater autonomy for the Saada province and protect against "perceived encroachment by Sunni Islamists;" and another five rebellions then followed (*ibid.*). Human Rights Watch reports that government officials and politicians that were interviewed allege that the Houthi movement is seeking to re-establish the Zaydi imamate (Oct. 2008, 29). International Crisis Group interviewed a Yemeni academic in 2014 who stated that, according to him, the Houthi armed movement is striving to return to the rule they lost in 1962 (International Crisis Group 10 June 2014, 13).

Sources state that the Houthi group was named after Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, the group's leader who was killed in the first uprising in 2004 (BBC 26 Mar. 2015; Reuters 20 May 2015). According to sources, the Al-Houthi family is a "Hashemite" (International Crisis Group 10 June 2014, 1; Assistant Professor 23 Aug. 2015), or "sayyid" family (Professor of Islamic Studies 21 Aug. 2015). Sources similarly report that the leadership of the Houthis are sayyids (Tony Blair Faith Foundation 26 Mar. 2015; Professor of Islamic Studies 21 Aug. 2015), of the al-Huthiya clan (*ibid.*). According to a Human Rights Watch report from 2008, Hashemites "figure prominently" in the Houthi movement and according to an interview conducted with a local Yemeni political analyst, "30 percent of fighting Huthis and the entire military leadership [of the Houthi movement] today [2008] is Hashemite" (Human Rights Watch Oct. 2008, 30). According to the Elcano Royal Institute, a think tank that focuses on international and strategic studies (Elcano Royal Institute n.d.), the support network of the Houthi includes "alliances between influential tribal sheikhs and prominent Hashemite families" (*ibid.* 24 Mar. 2015).

A report produced by International Crisis Group, quoting an April 2014 interview with a Zaydi scholar in Sanaa, states that

[t]he Huthis have support from Hashemites who do not believe in the group's religious ideas, but who sympathise with them because of ethnic affiliation. The movement also enjoys support from a wider subset of Zaydis, who, like the Hashemites, do not believe in all of the ideas or actions of the Huthis. But they sympathise because Huthis are Zaydi and because, as a group, Zaydis feel marginalised by the state and Islah. (International Crisis Group 10 June 2014, 10)

According to sources, Islah is a Sunni Islamist party [1] (EIU 15 July 2014; Holzapfel Mar. 2014, 8).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an associate professor of political science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges who specializes in comparative politics of the Middle East, including in Yemen, stated that the Houthi movement "was and remains a populist movement and has been critical of more established Hashemite political leaders" (Associate Professor 23 Aug. 2015). According to the Professor of geography, the leadership of the Houthi movement is Zaydi, but not all Zaidi support the movement (Professor of geography 24 Aug. 2015). The same source explained that while Zaydi sadah [Hashemites] "support the

defense of the role of Sadah and Zaidism in Yemen, many Sadah do not agree with [the Houthi]" (24 Aug. 2015). A report produced for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), an independent, nonpartisan, federally funded organization (USIP n.d.), and written by the 2013 Deputy Head of the German Embassy in Sanaa, similarly notes that there is opposition to the Houthi movement among Zaydis and Hashemites across the country and the Houthi movement "represents only a fraction of these two groups" (Holzapfel Mar. 2014, 21).

2.1 Treatment of Hashemites by Houthi Movement Members

The Professor of geography states that the Houthi movement of Ansar Allah "represses its opposition, particularly the Islah party in Yemen, but may also attack rivals or threats from within the Zaidi Sadah community" (Professor of geography 24 Aug. 2015). The same source explained that the Houthi leadership may target those, including Sadah, "who do not agree with [their] political stances" (ibid.). The Associate Professor expressed the opinion that it is possible that Houthis might "'target' non-Houthi Hashemites, particularly if they were critical of the Houthis' populism" (23 Aug. 2015).

Further information on the treatment of Hashemites by the Houthi could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.2 Houthi Areas of Operation

Sources state that the Houthis have control over large areas of Yemen (France24 30 June 2015; AP 25 Mar. 2015). According to sources, this includes the provinces of Saada and Amran (BBC 26 Mar. 2015; EIU 15 July 2014). Sources further state that they have controlled Saada since 2011 (Al-Monitor 15 Sept. 2014; EIU 15 July 2014). Since early 2015, the Houthi have maintained control of the capital city, Sana'a (*The Telegraph* 30 June 2015; BBC 27 Mar. 2015) having forced President Hadi to flee to Aden (ibid.).

Sources published in August 2015 further state that Houthis have also been in conflict with exiled government supporters and Saudi-led coalition forces in the southern city of Taiz (Reuters 24 Aug. 2015; Al Jazeera 16 Aug. 2015).

3. Treatment of Hashemites by Authorities

Information on the treatment of Hashemites by the authorities was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Professor of geography, the 2012-2015 transitional government "was not really a government, but a container of rivalries between parties and factions" (24 Aug. 2015). The Associate Professor of political science stated that between 2014-2015, it is difficult to define a central government or state security forces in Yemen because between September 2014 and January 2015, the Houthis were part of the government and "since then, part of the government has left for Saudi Arabia and has fought a war with other parts" (23 Aug. 2015). According to sources, the Hadi government moved its operations to Saudi Arabia in late March 2015 and Saudi Arabia is leading a military coalition in an attempt to reinstate President Hadi (BBC 27 Mar. 2015; *The Wall Street Journal* 26 Mar. 2015; *The Washington Post* 21 June 2015).

The Professor of geography stated that the security forces were not reformed during the transitional government of 2012 and as such, "the old regime of [President] Saleh still controlled the security apparatus to a large extent" (Professor of geography 24 Aug. 2015). The same source further stated that the "main enemy" of Ansar Allah was the Islahi wing of the Saleh regime, those aligned with Ali Muhsin [2] (ibid.). The source explained that the Salafi movement and Islah party "targeted Ansar Allah specifically" and explained that during the transitional government period of 2012-2015, "[t]he Ali Muhsin/Islah faction might well have used its position to attack Ansar Allah" or those suspected of supporting it (ibid.).

According to the Professor of Islamic studies, as the Houthis are involved in leading the "ongoing rebellion," "their sayyid clan (al-Huthiyya)," as well as the northern sayyids that have supported them, "may have been indeed targeted by security forces that are loyal to President Hadi" (21 Aug. 2015). The BBC reports that there are divided loyalties in the security forces, with some units backing President Hadi, others siding with the Houthis, and some with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh (BBC 26 Mar. 2015). According to the Elcano Royal Institute, some military units cooperated with the Houthi movement when they took over Sana'a (24 Mar. 2015).

According to the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2013*, members of the Zaydi community reported "government harassment and discrimination, including detention, based on allegations of sympathizing with the Ansar Allah, the self-described political arm of the Houthi movement" (US 28 July 2014, 3). The same source further states that some of the detainees were released, while others were held "either because of their religious affiliation or connections to sectarian fighting" (ibid.). According to the

International Crisis Group report, a Zaydi scholar explained that the Houthi movement "has never been a monolith" and that it has

benefited from layers of tribal support, sympathies of northern citizens who suffered from the government's military campaign, and [that] many Hashemites/Zaydis throughout the country who, originally not associated with the Huthis, came to sympathise with the movement after government persecution for alleged affiliation. (International Crisis Group 10 June 2014, 11)

4. Treatment of Hashemites by Extremist Groups

Information on the treatment of Hashemites by, or relationship to, other groups, including extremist groups, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to sources, both the Islamic State [also known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), or Daesh] and al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) are active in Yemen (*The Guardian* 7 July 2015; CBS News 23 Mar. 2015; *The Telegraph* 30 June 2015). Sources state that AQAP and the Houthis have clashed near Radaa, in al-Bayda province (Al Jazeera 17 Oct. 2014; *Yemen Times* 11 Dec. 2014). Al Jazeera reports that AQAP considers Shi'a "heretics" (Al Jazeera 17 Oct. 2014). According to Al Arabiya News, an English-language news site, AQAP considers "Houthi rebels" as "apostates" (Al Arabiya News 25 Sept. 2014).

Media sources indicate that ISIS has targeted Houthi members and considers them "apostates" (*The Telegraph* 30 June 2015) or "heretics" (Reuters 20 June 2013). Reuters reports that ISIS has detonated four car bombs in June 2015 at mosques used by the Houthis and at the group's headquarters in Sanaa, which killed two people and injured about 60 more (20 June 2015). According to sources, in June 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for a car bomb that targeted two Houthi chiefs at a mosque in Sanaa and caused dozens of casualties (*The Telegraph* 30 June 2015; France24 30 June 2015).

5. State Protection

Information on the state protection available to Hashemites could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The report produced for the USIP states that the Islah party is a collection of Sunni Islamist members ranging from "moderate Islamic conservatives to hard-core Salafis" (Holzapfel Mar. 2014, 8). Other sources state that Islah is associated with the Muslim Brotherhood (International Crisis Group 10 June 2014, 7; Huffington Post 16 Apr. 2015).

[2] According to sources, Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar is the former commander of the 1st Armored Division (Tony Blair Faith Foundation n.d.; *Politico Magazine* 15 Oct. 2014) and has allies within the Islah party (ibid.). Sources further state that he is an advisor to President Hadi (Tony Blair Faith Foundation n.d.; *Today's Zaman* 7 Jan. 2015).

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