



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: YEMEN

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### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international  
freedom of religion or  
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assessing and unflinchingly  
confronting threats to this  
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## Religious Freedom Restrictions in Houthi-Controlled Areas of Yemen

*By Scott Weiner, Senior Policy Analyst*

### Overview

Since the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014, Yemenis have suffered serious and ongoing violations of religious freedom. Houthi authorities have subjected religious minorities to harassment and arrest, even amid violent conflict that has exacerbated one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Members of many religious communities are concerned about their place in a future Yemen amid United Nations-mediated peace talks, as the Houthi leadership continues to marginalize or threaten many of them.

This report highlights religious freedom violations across several communities in Yemen and recommends more proactive U.S. policy to preserving these freedoms.

### The Houthi Movement

The Houthi movement is named for Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed who established the *Shabab al-Moumineen* (Believing Youth) movement in 1992 in the northwestern Yemeni province of Sa'ada. The movement promoted Zaidi Shi'a Muslim revivalism and [education](#), and eventually came to oppose the rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh as well as the cross-border influence of Salafi Islam from neighboring Saudi Arabia. After Yemeni security forces [killed](#) al-Houthi in 2004 following his launch of an anti-government insurgency, his brother Abdul Malik al-Houthi took control of the Houthi movement, which formally called itself *Ansar Allah* (Supporters of Allah).

The Houthis and Yemen's government reached a ceasefire agreement in 2010, but the former participated soon thereafter in the 2011 protests that led to the ouster of President Saleh and the instatement of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi in 2012. While they joined the National Dialogue Conference held between 2013 and 2014 to broker a reconciliation agreement, the Houthis ultimately rejected the outcomes document it produced, as it left them [without access](#) to the sea or to natural resources. Following this breakdown in negotiations, the Houthis aligned with former President Saleh against President Hadi to actively wage war on the recognized government, and they quickly made territorial gains in key parts of the country.



In 2014, the Houthis expanded their territorial control and captured the capital Sana'a. In 2015, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition that included fellow Gulf Cooperation Council allies, particularly the United Arab Emirates, to invade Yemen in support of President Hadi and against the Houthis. Beginning in June 2018, Yemeni forces, supported by their coalition partners, have sought to take back control from Houthi forces. However, to date, that coalition has not succeeded in ending Houthi control of Sana'a and significant portions of Western Yemen.

While the current Houthi movement is a [broad coalition](#) of ideologically, religiously, and politically [varied](#) groups, its core ideology is comprised of nationalist and populist tenets in addition to a singular interpretation of Zaidi Shi'a Islam, also known as "Fiver" Shi'ism. Zaidis follow the *fiqh* (jurisprudence) of Zayd ibn 'Ali, son of the fourth Imam in line of succession from the Prophet Muhammad through his grandson, Hussein. This interpretation [differs significantly](#) from the version of Ja'fari Shi'a Islam, or "Twelver" Shi'ism," that Iran's government endorses. However, Houthi authorities have persecuted members of religious communities on similar grounds to those used by Iran's government, and mutual enmity for Saudi Arabia has drawn Houthis and Iranians more closely together in recent years.

Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Houthi movement adopted its slogan: "Allah is great, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory for Islam." While its origins lay outside the movement—and outside Zaidi Shi'ism—Houthi protestors carry signs bearing the slogan at political rallies, and their authorities have prominently posted it on buildings throughout Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. These political slogans indicate not only the explicit anti-Semitism that Houthi authorities promote in the service of their nationalist agenda, but also a broader trend of religious intolerance which restricts the religious freedom of non-Zaidi Yemenis from across a variety of religious affiliations and identities.

## Sunni Muslims

Sectarianism has not historically been a major element of Yemeni politics and society, in which about 65 percent of the population of [28.9 million](#) are Sunni Muslims. For example, marriages between Sunni and Shi'a Muslim Yemenis were fairly common in the past, and the two communities often worshipped in shared mosques. However, the Houthis employ sectarian rhetoric and symbolism to [highlight and exacerbate](#) religious differences, even though some Sunni Muslim Yemenis [support](#) the movement. The Houthis have [referred](#) to Sunni Muslim opposition groups as *takfiri* (those who declare other Muslims apostates) and accuse Sunni Muslims who do not align with the movement as [collaborators](#) with or spies for the Saudi-led coalition. The Houthis have also tried to [pressure](#) Sunni Muslim imams to deliver prescribed sermons at mosques in Houthi-controlled areas.

## Christians

The Christian community in Yemen once numbered [41,000](#), including both Yemenis and expatriates living in the country. In recent years, the community has shrunk to only a [few thousand](#) as many have fled from the country's violent conflict. Yemeni authorities have [detained and interrogated](#) Christians on the basis of their faith and [confiscated](#) Christian religious material. Muslim converts to Christianity also face the risk of expulsion from their tribal group, cutting off their access to vital resources and social connections. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in Yemen (ISIS–Yemen) targets Christians in the country as well; for example, in 2016, ISIS–Yemen kidnapped Catholic priest Tom Uzhunnalil, killing four nuns and 12 civilians during the raid. Father Uzhunnali remained in captivity until [May 2017](#).

## Jews

Yemen's Jewish community once numbered [50,000](#) and was concentrated in the governorates of Sa'ada, Amran, and Sana'a. However, following the November 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine, rioters in Aden killed 82 Jews; soon thereafter, many of the remaining community members left for Israel or other countries. During their anti-government insurgency in the early 2000s, Houthi authorities deployed anti-Semitism as a political tool. They [threatened](#) the Jewish community and [destroyed](#) Jewish homes; as such, members of the community still in Yemen are at high risk of persecution. Only a small community of fewer than [50](#) Jews now remains in the country, after 17 of its members were [secretly airlifted](#) to Israel in 2016.

## Hindus

Yemen is home to a [few thousand](#) Hindus, a community supported by centuries of maritime trade with India. From 1839 to 1932, the port city of Aden was under the colonial control of British authorities in Mumbai, but Indian merchant families had lived in Yemen long beforehand. There are Hindu [temples](#) in the port city of Aden as well as in the capital [Sana'a](#). Aden was once home to three Hindu temples, but the extremist group [Ansar al-Sharia raided, looted and destroyed](#) the al-Banyan temple in July 2015.

## Baha'is

Yemen is home to about 2,000 Baha'is. While the community faced persecution before the Houthi takeover, this persecution has worsened under Houthi authority. Abd al-Malik al-Houthi has [called on](#) his followers to "defend" Yemen from Baha'is, to whom he [referred](#) as "infidels" and "collaborators with Israel" in a March 2018 speech. Houthi authorities arrested Baha'i community leader Hamid bin Haydara on December 3, 2013. They accused him of being a spy for Israel—a common charge against Baha'is, given that the Baha'i World Centre is located in Haifa, where the faith's administrative headquarters were established more than half a century before Israel's founding. Houthi authorities also [accused](#) Mr. bin Haydara of attempting to make Socotra Island a homeland for Baha'is. In 2018, the Houthis [arrested](#) 24 Baha'is in Yemen on charges of espionage and apostasy, both of which are capital offenses. Five of these Baha'is, along with Hamid bin Haydara, remain in prison as of June 2020. [Hamid bin Haydara](#) is part of USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience (RPOC) Project highlighting cases of religious freedom violations and USCIRF's efforts for the release of RPOCs such as Mr. bin Haydara.

Throughout the first part of 2020, Houthi policy toward these Baha'i detainees has been contradictory and inconsistent. On March 22, a Houthi appeals court [upheld](#) a death sentence that was passed against bin Haydara in January 2018. However, on March 25, Houthi Supreme Political Council head Mehdi al-Meshat [announced](#) in a speech that Mr. bin Haydara would be freed alongside the five other Baha'i detainees. Despite this announcement, the Houthi authorities have released none of the detained Baha'is, including Mr. bin Haydara. On April 23, the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) [called for](#) the immediate and unconditional release of these prisoners.



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### Conclusion

The United States government should more proactively amplify the voices of the marginalized religious communities in Yemen, and call out Houthi authorities when they violate the essential religious freedoms of all Yemenis.

To advance religious freedom in Yemen, Congress should:

- Hold hearings on the status of religious minorities in Yemen to provide a platform for Yemenis to inform members of Congress and the American people about religious freedom violations there.

The administration should:

- Continue to designate the Houthis as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, for systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended.

- Call publicly on Houthi authorities to immediately release all religious prisoners of conscience in Yemen and abide by their commitment to drop charges and free all detained members of Yemen’s Baha’i community, including USCIRF religious prisoner of conscience [\*Hamid bin Haydara\*](#).
- Create, host, and fund fora and conferences for Yemeni religious minorities to educate policy makers, analysts, and scholars about the status of religious freedom in Yemen and make recommendations to the international community about how to best ensure freedom of religion in Yemen.
- Ensure the swift provision of humanitarian aid and work urgently toward a cessation of violence in Yemen in order to diminish the effects of Yemen’s civil war, which disproportionately affect religious minorities.

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