



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: YEMEN

September 2021

Nadine Maenza
Chair

Nury Turkel
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Anurima Bhargava

James W. Carr

Frederick A. Davie

Khizr Khan

Sharon Kleinbaum

Tony Perkins

Erin D. Singshinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

Religious Freedom Conditions in Yemen

By Scott Weiner, Supervisory Policy Analyst, USCIRF

Introduction

Religious freedom conditions in Yemen deteriorated significantly in late 2020 and early 2021. Armed Houthi militants continued to violate religious freedom, targeting members of the Baha'i, Christian, and Jewish communities, but continuing to restrict the religious freedom of Sunni Muslims and other communities as well. More than 99 percent of Yemenis are Muslim, with about 65 percent *identifying* as Sunni Muslims and 35 percent identifying as Zaidi Shi'a Muslims. Baha'is, Jews, Hindus, and Christians comprise less than one percent of Yemen's population, though the conflict has made accurate estimates difficult.

The Houthi movement was founded in 1992 by Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi and promotes Zaidi Shi'a Muslim revivalism and *education*. It came to oppose the government of former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and began expanding its territorial control in 2014 under the leadership of al-Houthi's brother, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, capturing the Yemeni capital Sana'a in September of that year. Since *February 2021*, the Houthis have *continued* a "*devastating offensive*" on Marib governorate against Saudi-backed forces aligned with former Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansour al-Hadi.

Religious minorities in Yemen have suffered immensely amidst the ongoing conflict. In both January and August 2020, Houthi militants *fired* ballistic missiles at a mosque in a pro-government military installation in Marib, *killing* a total of 123 people and wounding approximately 120. In the past year, Houthi authorities legally threatened several Baha'is and froze their financial assets. Houthi authorities have also *arrested* Christians. Several Jewish families were forced to flee their homes in Sana'a citing Houthi harassment and threats. One community member, Libi Marhabi, remains in prison *despite* a Houthi court order for his release.

Each year since 2018, and most recently in December 2020, the U.S. State Department has designated the Houthis as an "entity of particular concern," or EPC, under the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 for engaging in systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom. As the United States continues work to facilitate a resolution to the protracted violent conflict in Yemen, it should advocate for religious freedom concerns to be addressed as part of a long-term agreement, and work for the release of religious prisoners of conscience. The expulsion of Yemen's religious communities through legal and political pressure undermines the



credibility of the Houthis' commitment to a sustainable political agreement in Yemen and does irreparable damage to a country with a millennia-long history of religious diversity.

Baha'is

Yemen is home to about 2,000 Baha'is, and the community has [existed](#) in Yemen since the 19th century. While Baha'is 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, and held him without charges. A judge [sentenced](#) Haydara to death in January 2018 and ordered the dissolution of Baha'i institutions in Yemen, a decision that a Houthi appeals court [upheld](#) in March 2020 following [18 court appeal hearings](#).

Following an international advocacy campaign, Haydara and five other members of the Baha'i community were pardoned, [released](#), and deported out of Yemen on July 31, 2020. However, the Houthis have [continued](#) legal proceedings against five of these six Yemeni Baha'is, calling them "fugitives." They also continued to pursue legal action against 19 other Baha'is who were charged in 2018, and targeted lawyers who defended Baha'is in Yemen as well. In March 2021, the Houthis also [blocked](#) Baha'is from access to their bank accounts, including the community's spokesman Abdullah al-Olafi.

Christians

The Christian community in Yemen once numbered [41,000](#), including both Yemenis and expatriates. In recent years, the community has shrunk to only a [few thousand](#), [including](#) Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Eritrean Christians, as many have fled from the country's violent conflict. Christians who remain in Yemen are [unable](#) to worship in public without fear. Houthi authorities have harassed and arrested Christians, particularly converts from Islam. In prison, some Christians have been [forced](#) to recant their faith under extreme duress. Houthi authorities [detained](#) a Christian convert priest, Musheer Khulaidi, for four years before freeing him in February 2021. During his time in prison, Khulaidi was subjected to both torture and solitary confinement. Following his release, he remained under surveillance for months. In January 2021, Houthi authorities also [detained](#) Christian convert Bashir al-Bakari on charges of apostasy — a capital offense in Yemen — and preaching Christianity. Al-Bakari was denied visits from his brother while in detention at the Criminal Investigation Prison in Taiz. He was released in February 2021 but arrested [again](#) in August 2021.

Jews

Yemen was home to one of the world's [oldest](#) Jewish diaspora communities, and the country's Jewish community once [consisted](#) of 55,000 Jews. Between 1948 and 1950, 48,000 of these Jews [immigrated](#) to Israel as part of Operation Magic Carpet. Between 1992 and 1995, under President Ali Abdullah Saleh, 800 more Yemeni Jews [obtained permission](#) to leave Yemen. 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. The Houthi slogan itself contains the phrase "curses upon the Jews." Under pressure from the Houthis, many Jews left Yemen for other [countries](#) in the Middle East, Europe, and North America. In 2013, following the [murder](#) of Jewish man Harun Yusuf Zindani, 30 Jews [departed](#) Yemen for Israel. As of 2018, only [50](#) Jews remained in Yemen. In both August 2020 and January 2021, Yemeni Jewish families [left](#) Yemen for the United Arab Emirates, where they were united with family members. In March 2021, the Houthis [expelled](#) 13 Jewish families from Sana'a.

Houthi authorities also continue to hold captive [Libi Marhabi](#), a member of Yemen's Jewish community. Marhabi was [arrested](#) in 2016 after reportedly assisting in the passage of a Torah scroll from Yemen to Israel. Despite an appeals court decision in 2019 that he should be released, Marhabi [remains](#) in prison and is in ill health. In May 2021, the U.S. State Department [reiterated](#) its [previous](#) call for Marhabi's release.

Conclusion

Yemeni civilians of all religions and beliefs continue to be victims of Yemen's protracted civil conflict, with religious minorities also facing targeted religious, political, and social persecution by Houthi authorities. As the conflict continues, religious freedom in Yemen has deteriorated without any sign of abatement. In February 2021, President Biden appointed [Timothy A. Lenderking](#) as U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen to assist with efforts to mediate a peace agreement. Protecting freedom of religion or belief for all [persecuted religious groups](#) in Yemen will be an important foundation for this agreement, ensuring its long term viability and an end to ongoing and systematic Houthi persecution.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Professional Staff

Danielle Ashbahian
Supervisory Public Affairs Officer

Dwight Bashir
Director of Outreach and Policy

Susan Bishai
Policy Analyst

Elizabeth K. Cassidy
Director of Research and Policy

Mingzhi Chen
Policy Analyst

Patrick Greenwalt
Policy Analyst

Gabrielle Hasenstab
Communications Specialist

Roy Haskins
Director of Finance and Operations

Thomas Kraemer
Director of Human Resources

Kirsten Lavery
Supervisory Policy Analyst

John Lechner
Policy Analyst

Niala Mohammad
Senior Policy Analyst

Jason Morton
Senior Policy Analyst

Mohyeldin Omer
Policy Analyst

Dylan Schexnaydre
Victims List and Outreach Specialist

Jamie Staley
Supervisory Policy Adviser

Zack Udin
Researcher

Nina Ullom
Congressional Relations and Outreach Specialist

Madeline Vellturo
Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.