



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET **RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN HOUTHI- CONTROLLED AREAS OF YEMEN**

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Introduction

Religious diversity in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen faces near-total extinction. In the one-third of Yemen under Houthi control, primarily in the north and west, the group has continued to perpetrate systematic and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), with severe impacts on religious minorities. Furthermore, women and girls are subjected to laws rooted in the Houthis' singular interpretation of Shi'a Islam. Since 2019, USCIRF has recommended the Houthis be designated as an entity of particular concern (EPC) for particularly severe religious freedom violations. Each year since 2018, and most recently in December 2023, the U.S. Department of State has designated the Houthis as an EPC. The relationship between the Houthis and the internationally recognized Republic of Yemen Government (RYG) remains adversarial, shaped by over a decade of intractable conflict, mutual nonrecognition, and competing claims to legitimacy.

This factsheet outlines religious freedom conditions in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. Certain provisions of Houthi governance justified on religious grounds severely restrict religious freedom for Baha'is, Christians, Jews, and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Houthi leaders systematically foster an environment that threatens FoRB for minority religious communities through the use of forced religious indoctrination, oral directives, state propaganda, and religious indoctrination campaigns. The group imposes its singular religious interpretations in detention centers and schools and over traditional and social media. Individuals who reject this forced imposition of Houthi religious beliefs have either fled to the south or left Yemen entirely to seek refuge. The few remaining members of minority faith communities stay hidden due to threats of Houthi intimidation and violence.

Background

The Houthis are a Zaidi Shi'a Muslim group that was founded in northern Yemen in 1992 as a religious revivalist movement. They later transformed into a political and military force actively involved in the Yemeni civil war, which pitted the Iran-backed Houthi movement against Yemen's internationally recognized RYG and its backers from a Saudi-led coalition. Houthi authorities have persecuted members of religious communities—in particular Baha'is, Jews, Christians, and nonbelievers—on similar grounds to those used by Iran's government. Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Houthi movement adopted its slogan: "Allah is great, death to America, death to

USCIRF's Mission

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

Israel, curse the Jews, victory for Islam.” In September 2023, a Houthi delegation met with Saudi officials in Riyadh for the first time to reach a potential peace agreement to end the ongoing conflict. However, Houthi participation in regional conflict following the October 7th attacks on Israel has stunted progress toward a formal ending to the civil war. On January 22, 2025, President Donald J. Trump signed an [executive order](#) initiating a process for the redesignation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). On March 4, U.S. Secretary of State Marco A. Rubio officially made this redesignation.

Forced Religious Indoctrination

The Houthi movement systematically forces religious ideas on students regardless of their religious identity and personal religious beliefs. Since 2015, the Houthis have made nearly 500 modifications to Yemen’s school curriculum to this end. Religious minorities enrolled in Houthi education programs, particularly Christians, are forced to study the Qur’an. A teenaged Christian brother and sister were reportedly expelled from school for refusing to take part in Houthi Qur’an lessons on the basis of their religious belief. In 2024, a Christian family reportedly fled an area of Houthi-controlled Yemen so their children would not be forced to participate in mosque prayers and attend a Houthi religious indoctrination camp. Another individual was reportedly held in a Houthi camp for 20 days for forced indoctrination in Houthi ideology after expressing doubts about Islam. The Houthis have also used the education sector to create a societal environment in which non-Muslim minorities are at risk of having their FoRB restricted. One Houthi sixth-grade lesson describes Israel as a “cancerous Jewish gland.” Ninth-grade curricula teach antisemitic tropes, with modules describing Jews as deceptive, greedy, and cheap.

Detention Centers

Houthi authorities selectively mistreat non-Muslim minority detainees in prison because of their religious identity. One former Baha’i detainee reported that during their four-year imprisonment in a Houthi detention center in Sana’a, fellow Baha’i prisoners were forced to sit in religious education classes as a condition for their release. Authorities have also coerced prisoners to learn from the *Malazim*, the Houthi’s foundational ideological text of Islam based largely on the teachings of Hussein al-Houthi, founder of the movement. Houthi prison authorities also instill fear within religious minority prisoners by jailing them alongside prisoners who have committed violence or

are detained for membership in violent nonstate entities and harbor a strong animus toward Jews, Baha’is, and Christians. Houthi authorities inform these prisoners that their fellow inmates are of a non-Muslim minority faith background and then allow the prisoners to physically assault them.

Targeting of Religious Minorities

Baha’is

Yemen is home to approximately 2,000 Baha’is. The community has existed in Yemen since the 19th century. Baha’is faced persecution before the Houthi territorial expansion of 2014, but their situation has worsened under Houthi authority. The Houthi movement has continued to spread anti-Baha’i propaganda through state-run media and public speeches referring to the Baha’i community as a dangerous anti-Islamic agent of foreign powers with subversive intentions. In May 2023, armed Houthi forces [raided](#) an annual Baha’i national convention in Yemen’s capital Sana’a and detained 17 Baha’i members. By August 2024, all of the [remaining](#) members [were released](#) after being forced to sign a statement renouncing their faith. In 2025, the former detainees continue to be prohibited from gathering for worship or communicating with other Baha’is.

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. Between October 2023 and September 2024, dozens of loosely organized Christian communities ceased gathering for worship in private entirely because of heightened security threats. Many Christian converts have fled Houthi-controlled areas of northern Yemen as a result of the Houthi’s persecution and increasing societal intolerance. In 2024, a Christian convert was reportedly killed by family members because of his Christian faith.

Furthermore, the recent Houthi [crackdown](#) on United Nations (UN) personnel in northern Yemen, which has [persisted](#) in 2025, is at least partially based on the assumption that these personnel are Christian and enemies of Islam. Some UN employees working in these areas have been pressured to [confess](#) falsely on camera that they work for Christian interests and are spies.

Jews

Yemen's Jewish community once consisted of 55,000 individuals, but heightened pressure during and after Israel's establishment in 1948 led to the mass displacement of Yemeni Jews. Facing severe pressure from the Houthi movement in the 2000s, many of these remaining Jews fled Yemen or were expelled by authorities. Jewish prisoner of conscience [Libi Marhabi](#) is reportedly the last remaining Jew in Yemen. He remains in Houthi detention as of 2025 despite a 2019 court order for his release. Houthi prison authorities have reportedly subjected Marhabi to selectively harsh punishment because of his religious identity as a Jew. He has been placed in a prison ward with inmates from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) who subject him to threats and physical assault for being Jewish. In May 2024, Marhabi grew physically ill from living in inhumane and poor living conditions. Prison officials reportedly continue to deny Marhabi any contact with his family. They have also repeatedly withheld food and subjected him to physical beatings, solitary confinement, electrical shocks, and hours-long interrogations.

The Houthis continue to escalate their antisemitic rhetoric alongside ongoing rocket and drone attacks on Israel. A children's cartoon broadcast in March 2024 on the Houthis' Shaba TV network describes Jews as "treacherous." It also portrays a meeting of Jews invoking the antisemitic Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The broadcast also portrays Zionist Theodor Herzl as seeking "political and economic control of the world," invoking the antisemitic trope of Jewish political and economic conspiracy. In May 2025, the Houthi channel Al-Masirah broadcast a Houthi rally in Sana'a during which children were chanting "curses upon the Jews," which is part of the Houthi slogan.

Ahmadiyya Muslims

Houthi authorities have engaged in systematic targeting of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in northern Yemen. In January 2024, Houthi authorities conducted a mass arrest of Ahmadiyya Muslims, including the community's leader. They released the detainees in April 2024 after reportedly subjecting them to forced indoctrination and renunciation of faith. Community members are reluctant to speak about Houthi FoRB restrictions for fear of retribution.

Houthi Policies Rooted in Religion

Religious Restrictions on Women and Girls

The Houthi movement requires all women to travel with an escort (mahram) as defined in Islamic religious texts. The restriction includes non-Muslim women and foreign women aid workers. In 2025, the Houthis have continued to enforce an oral directive to this effect originally issued by the group's land transportation authority in 2022. The directive created conditions for the Houthis' eventual enforcement of a religiously based policy at Sana'a University that limits women's access to the campus. In 2024, the Houthis ordered car and travel companies to serve only women who adhere to the mahram policy. Women face other restrictions in Yemen based on Houthi religious interpretations, including barriers to healthcare and exclusion from public spaces. The Houthis have also forcibly closed businesses that cater exclusively to women, justifying the policy as necessary to protect the country's "Islamic identity." The Houthis have also continued to mobilize all-female military battalions, called zainabiyyat, to target women who reject Houthi religious ideas. These units continue to perpetrate a range of religious freedom violations—including the forced sectarian education of Yemeni women—by taking over mosques, private homes, and schools to promote Houthi teachings of Islam. In December 2024, zainabiyyat female fighters reportedly coerced groups of Yemeni women in Sana'a, Hajjah, and Ibb to participate in various sectarian educational programs.

Women from minority faith groups are especially vulnerable to Houthi persecution. Interlocutors report that in 2025, many Christian women have continued to fully veil in public, against their personal religious beliefs, for fear of being discovered as non-Muslim. Houthi authorities have weaponized Baha'i religious conceptions of modesty in their repression of Baha'i women by conducting interrogations in bedrooms late at night with male interrogators. This Houthi tactic of violating religious modesty beliefs to maximize humiliation and shame for religious women is also used to deter them from further opposing the group's authority.

Religiously Grounded Judicial Decisions

The Houthis have repeatedly imposed charges for "immoral acts" defined according to Houthi religious interpretations. In January 2024, the Houthis arrested Judge Abdulwahab Qatran on charges related to alcohol consumption (which Islam prohibits) after he criticized the Houthis' Red Sea attacks on social media. Houthi judicial authorities also violate international law



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by imposing religiously mandated punishments, including use of the death penalty for nonviolent offenses. In February 2024, Houthi forces gathered 30 men, including 16 convicted in 2023 on religious charges of sexual immorality (lawat), in a Dhamar cemetery and threatened to execute the men by stoning them to death. The men were instead returned to detention. No public reports suggest the executions have yet been carried out.

Discrimination against Religious Minorities in Aid Distribution

The Houthis have discriminated against Christians and Baha'is in the distribution of essential humanitarian support during the current civil conflict. Activists report that Houthi authorities favor Muslims loyalists over non-Muslim minorities for receiving aid. Baha'is in Yemen in areas under Houthi control face significant difficulties in accessing humanitarian assistance because of their religious identity, especially families or individuals known in their neighborhoods as Baha'is. Houthi restrictions on Baha'is' freedom of movement, especially former

detainees, impedes Baha'i access to aid distribution centers or humanitarian services. Because members of the Baha'i faith live in constant fear of arrest or harassment by Houthi authorities, many choose to avoid public places, including aid distribution centers, for fear of persecution. Interlocutors report several cases of Houthi hospitals refusing medical treatment to Christians for their religious identity as well.

Conclusion

Having been redesignated an FTO by the Trump administration in March, the Houthis continue to violate international legal standards protecting freedom of religion or belief. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion." Despite these protections, people living under Houthi control continue to face systematic restrictions on this fundamental freedom to which they are entitled.

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