



THE SHIA IN YEMEN

Shia Rights Watch

2014

Established in 2011, Shia Rights Watch (SRW) is the world's first independent organization dedicated to define and protect the rights of Shia Muslims around the world. SRW is a non-governmental, not-for-profit research entity and advocacy group headquartered in Washington D.C., U.S.A. Shia Rights Watch holds a 501(c) status, as well as holding a Special Consultation Status (ECOSOC) with the United Nations. Shia Rights Watch aims to draw the international attention where Shia rights are violated; the aim is to give a voice to the oppressed and hold oppressors accountable for their crimes. S.R.W. achieves its objectives through strategic investigations supported by targeted advocacy in order to bring about informed action.

Vision

Freedom of religion for all

Shia Rights Watch envisions the world with peace for all humans, regardless of their religion, gender, race and origin. There should be regulations in every country to support every religion. We believe Shia Muslim as religion should be recognized in every country and any discrimination should be brought to light. God has given us all the freedom of religion and the rights to live in peace.

Mission

No Shia above the law and no Shia Below the law

Shia Rights Watch is dedicated to protect the rights of Shia Muslims worldwide. We investigate violations against Shia communities in order to raise awareness against injustice. We promote change through research and publications. Our reports and articles are submitted to governments and international organizations, and we continually monitor media outlets to ensure coverage of Shia rights violations. Shia Rights Watch stands for victims of prejudice, and supports activism in order to prevent discrimination, support political freedom, and protect people from inhumane conduct. We enlist the local public and international communities to support the cause of human rights for all.

The Purpose of SRW

Shia Muslims face constant oppression throughout the world solely based on their faith. In some countries, Shia Muslims have been the target of repeated persecution for centuries as evidenced in the well-documented expansion of extremism of the Wahhabi movement. We believe the underrepresented Shia Muslim population need a human rights organization that highlights the violations against them, while giving their call for help a louder voice.

Staff Organization

The organization began with the collaborative efforts of volunteers with a common interest in advocating international human rights. The momentum created by the increasing number of volunteer and activism allowed for a formal development of the foundation of Shia Rights Watch. Currently the organization has more than 600 active members working in various locations worldwide. The responsibilities of members range from gathering news and information to publishing reports and articles in order to advocate change. We are proud of the religiously and ethnically diverse group of activists who are working together towards a common goal.

Methodology of SRW

We believe that information is the most valuable resource in the investigative process. From the organization's inception, we have focused on gathering information through various media: interviewing witnesses, family members of the victims and victims themselves; on-site collection of resources; analyzing reports from various national and international organizations; meeting with non-governmental and religious organizations, leaders, and journalists; and creating information networks in a wide range of social sectors.

Based on the information collected from the above sources, different types of human rights violation have been identified. These violations include, but are certainly not limited to:

Violation of right of living;

Arbitrary arrest, unfair trial, and illegal detention;

Psychical & psychological abuse: torture, rape, and sexual assault;

Illegal confiscation of private property;

Demolition of Religions centers;

Employment discrimination;

Education discrimination;

Reports, Publications, and Distribution

Whether it is terrorist bombings of sacred shrines, torture and unjust detention of people, discriminative legislation or intimidation of school children for their sectarian beliefs, Shia have been victimized in most the world. In countries where the press is tightly controlled, most of these cases go unnoticed. Shia Rights Watch tells the stories of injustices and atrocities in order to give a voice to the marginalized Shia victims.

Journalists investigating topics regarding the Middle East will benefit from SRW's focus on the Shia communities since they are crucially important sectors in Middle Eastern society. For instance, In order to fully examine the ongoing atrocities committed against protesters of the Arab spring, it is necessary to know about the embedded Shia struggle. In areas where Shia have been formerly discriminated against more subtly, the Arab Spring opened a door for more blunt persecution. Cases reported in other parts of the world, such as in South Asia, describe violence and intimidation which reflect fluctuating trends in sectarian hostilities, fueled by various political issues, including terrorism. SRW's aim is to be able to report the crimes affecting Shia in every part of the globe.

SRW has investigators on the forefront who communicate directly with the victims and monitor multilingual news media outlets. SRW networks with national committees, international human rights organizations, as well as religious scholars of Shia communities. SRW's members comprise of people with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds united to defend the human rights. This international network provides invaluable information to commentators and journalists of the media who are seeking to explore the impact of events on the Shia communities worldwide.



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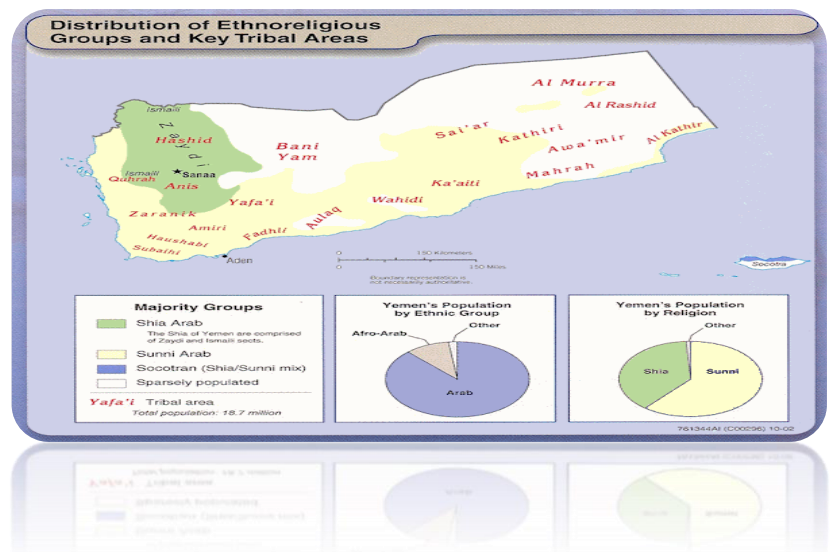
Summary

After a failed Gulf Corporation Council brokered democratic transition, Yemen seeks to break from its violent past and establish a government that adheres to the demands of its people. This democratic transition has moved along smoothly although insurgents in the north and terrorist attacks in the south threaten to derail this process. Yemen will not be able to complete the democratic transition they wish to see if the government does not ensure the security of its venerable populations, especially the minority Zaydi community.

With the transition initiated three years ago, here is where Yemen stands today:

- 40% of Yemenis, nearly 10 million people, are food insecure according to UNICEF and the World Food Program 1
 - That number is 701% for residents of the Sada'a governorate
- There are 321,282 Internally Displaced Persons in Yemen according to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)2
- Nearly 12 million Yemenis live in severe poverty according to the World Food Program3
- 84% of Yemenis believe that the economic situation in their area is getting worse according to Gallup 4
- There are over 200,000 refugees in Yemen according to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)5

The U.S. Department of State noted that there were "reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief or practice. Leading Salafi religious figures used accusations of apostasy to target political activists, journalists, bloggers, academics, and human rights defenders".⁶ While religious communities in Yemen have generally had an amicable relationship, the Department of State reports "sectarian rhetoric weakened inter-communal trust". This weakening of inter-communal trust has led to things such as intimidation, the destruction of religious shrines, and murder.⁷



This report seeks to increase awareness about human rights violations in Yemen. Although there is a lack of reporting on this issue in the face of other prominent issues in the country, we hope that this report can shed light on this topic which is often overlooked.

¹ World Food Program <https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/food-security-survey-shows-10-million-yemenis-still-struggle-food>

² UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486ba6.html>

³ World Food Program <https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/food-security-survey-shows-10-million-yemenis-still-struggle-food>

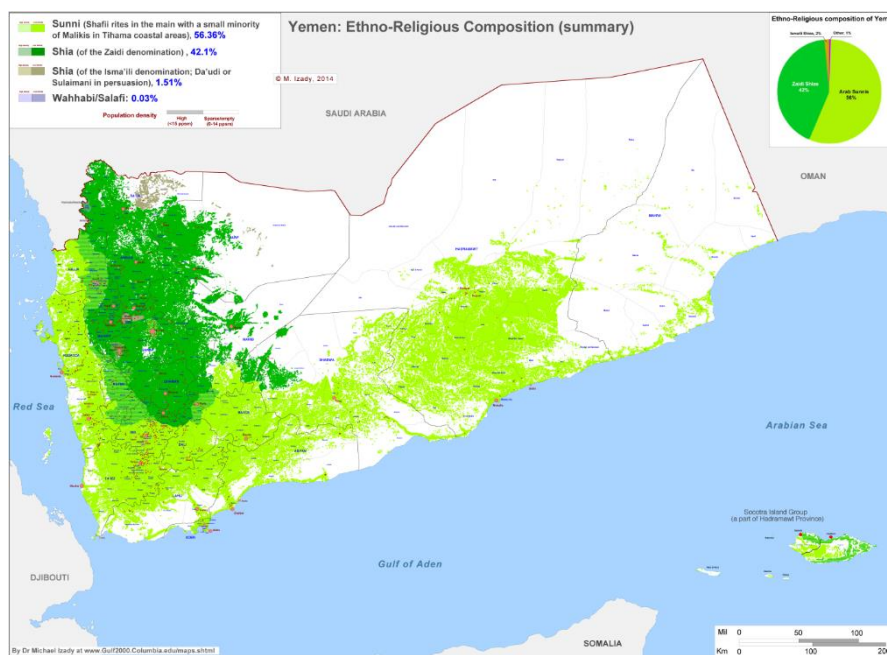
⁴ Gallup <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125375/yemenis-economic-situations-among-worst-region.aspx>

⁵ UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486ba6.html>

⁶ U.S. Department of State <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208632.pdf>

⁷ U.S. Department of State <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&clid=222321>

Chapter 1: Introduction



1.1 Demographic and Religious Distribution in Yemen

Yemen is bordered by Saudi Arabia (north), Oman (east), the Red Sea (west), and the Gulf of Aden (south) which flows into the Indian Ocean. The Island of Socotra is located just off of Yemen's southern coast. Yemen's western coast is only 20 miles from Djibouti and Yemen's Southern coast ranges from 60 miles to 300 miles in its distance from Somalia. Yemen's proximity to Somalia has made it a popular port for African migrants.

According to 2014 estimates, there are roughly 26 million people in Yemen which makes in the most populous country on the peninsula⁸. The country is predominantly Arab but there are a number of Africans, South Asians, and Europeans there who are either foreign residents or refugees⁹. According to U.S. government statistics 65 percent of the population identifies as Sunni and 35 percent of the population identifies as Shia, but other groups put the Shia population as high as 45 percent¹⁰. The remainder of Yemen's population includes Jews, Christians, Buddhists, members of the Baha'i faith, and others who are mostly either refugees or foreign residents.

Sunnis from the Shafi religious school largely live in the coastal areas such as the Tihama (western coast), Aden (largest city in the south), Hadramaut (eastern portion of the country), and Mukallah (south-eastern port city). The Shia population lives in the mountainous regions of Yemen which are to the north. The Shia in Yemen are composed of two different groups: Zaydis, Ismail'i. The Shia population is largely from the Zaydi religious school and lives in cities such as Sana'a (the capital), Dhamar, Amran, and Sada'a. There is a small number of Shia from the Ismail'i religious school and that population is largely concentrated around Shabam, Manakha, and in the outskirts of Sada'a. There are Shia from the Twelver sect who are native Yemenis but factors such

⁸ Look Lex <http://looklex.com/e/o/yemen.religions.htm>

⁹ Idib

¹⁰ Idib

as fear of repression and lack of representation have hindered the ability to gather accurate population statistics for this group.

1.2 The Political Importance of Yemen

With the base of Al-Qaeda in the Arabia peninsula located in the country, and its location at the southern tip of the Red Sea where roughly 11 percent of the world's petroleum travels, the stability of the country has strategic value for both Europe and the United States¹¹. The instability that has existed prior to the uprisings of 2011 and has continued since that point can have an adverse impact on the surrounding nations and the community at large as commerce in the region could be disrupted and violent terrorist attacks can persist and even intensify if the security situation in the country remains as it is. The violence that Yemen has seen this year from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in the south and from the Houthis in the north have intensified an already acute refugee crisis. Jeremy Sharp from the Congressional Research Service notes that:

“Some advocates also note that instability in Yemen would affect more than just U.S. interests—it would affect global energy security, due to Yemen's strategic location astride the Bab al Mandab strait between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Others assert that, while increased lawlessness in Yemen most likely will lead to more terrorist activity, U.S. involvement in Yemen should stem from basic humanitarian concerns for a poverty-stricken population desperately in need of development assistance”¹²

Due to its global political and economic importance, the political transformation that Yemen is undergoing will have far reaching effects.

1.3 Yemen after January 2011

Yemen was one of the first countries in the region to see demonstrations in 2011. Demonstrators took to the streets to voice their discontent with the 33 year rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Saleh would initially offer concessions to the protestors by promising not to run for another term as president once his term ended in 2013. This was not enough to stop the demonstrations and because the demonstrations persisted Saleh authorized a brutal crackdown that killed anywhere between 200 and 2,000 people according to BBC¹³.

The situation in Yemen would quickly turn violent on both sides as Al-Qaeda would carry out violent attacks against government forces, most notably the rocket attack on the presidential palace that would badly injure president Saleh and require him to leave the country for medical treatment.

The Gulf Cooperation Council, backed by the United States and the European Union, would eventually broker a deal among the political stakeholders in Yemen that would have president Saleh step down and the vice president, Abdo Rabbo Mansour al-Hadi assume the presidency. In addition to the position changes, Yemen would hold a national dialogue conference where 535 representatives from various regions and groups throughout the country would come together and discuss what they would like to see in their country going forward. After the conference government officials would work on writing a constitution and elections for parliament and president would take place. 2014 saw the end of the National Dialogue Conference but not a constitution nor elections, but they have been promised for the near future.

With the country in the rebuilding process, it is important that the Shia minority are able to establish rights in this new constitution and ensure that they are implemented. The Zaydi community, along

with the Yemeni government can work toward resolving the human rights violations that are currently occurring and that have occurred in the past through this political transition.

3



Chapter 2:

The oppression of the Zaydis, the Ismaili's, and an interview on the Twelver community in Yemen

While the numbers of Zaydi in Yemen are comparable with the number of Shafis, there have been incidents of targeted killings, and other related attacks on this population. According to the U.S. Department of State's Report on International Religious Freedom, Zaydis have faced harassment, detention based on their religious affiliation, pressure to convert to Sunni Islam, the prohibition of the commemoration of their holy days, the confiscation of their property, and violent attacks from both the government and non-governmental groups¹⁴.

Note: The Zaydi and Shafi communities have historically had an amicable relationship with one another but the past 50 years has witnessed an increase in sectarian rhetoric which has often accompanied harassment and violence.

2.1 Quick History of the Zaydi community

Zaydism emerged in the 8th century and is named after the group's first leader Zayid ibn Ali who was the grandson of Husayn who was killed at Karbala. Zayid became imam/leader in 713 after the death of Ali Zayn al- Abidin. Zaydi would be the first of Husayn's descendants to openly rebel against the Umayyads. This rebellion would lead to the death of Zayid in 740 in the town of Kufa which is in Iraq¹⁵.

¹³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-12482293>

¹⁴ U.S. State Department <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208632.pdf>

¹⁵ History of Zaydi Shia http://www.academia.edu/1116100/The_History_of_Zaydi_Studies_An_Introduction

¹⁶ Idib

¹⁷ Ismaili History <http://www.hrw.org/fr/node/75197/section/3>

¹⁸ Idib

¹⁹ Idib

Zaydis believe that any descendant of the Prophet can be an imam as long as they possess two attributes. They have to excel in knowledge and they have to be able to call others to fight against oppressors. While Zaydism did not originate in Yemen, most of its followers are there and Yemen has been Zaydism's intellectual hub for centuries now¹⁶.

In the 20th century, Northern Yemen was ruled by Zaydi Imams Yahya, Ahmad, and Badr in that order from roughly 1918 to 1962 when a coup deposed Imam Badr and established a republic

2.2 Quick History of the Ismaili community

There have been Ismailis living in the Haraz Mountains of Northern Yemen since 883 A.D. Ismailis established a wide range of religious networks throughout the country which culminated in the establishment of the Ismaili Sulayhid dynasty under Ali ibn Muhammad al-Sulayhi in 1038. This dynasty would rule over Yemen and parts of Oman for roughly a century. This dynasty would later be threatened by the expanding influence of the Zaydi community. Ismaili's would be persecuted by the Zaydi community and would eventually shift the center of the *da'wa* to India in 1539¹⁷.

The Ismaili community in Yemen is divided into two groups, the Sulaymanis which number around 120,000 between Yemen and the Najran area of Saudi Arabia, and the Dawudis (also referred to as Bohra) which number around 12,000 people¹⁸.

The Bohra in Yemen, which have extensive ties to India have undertaken many philanthropic endeavors such as offering interest free loans and replacing Qat plants (a popular herbal stimulant that is grown in Yemen) with coffee and Mango plants¹⁹.

It has been noted that the Bohra are viewed with caution and suspicion by many Yemeni Sunnis and Shia which has led to the generation of false rumors.



2.3 Interview with Yemeni Twelver

Shia Rights Watch conducted an interview with a Yemeni on the current situation of Twelvers in the country and how their position in society has involved in recent years. The name of the man interview will not be disclosed for security reasons.

When asked about the estimates of the number of Shia living in Yemen, the interviewee noted that one will not find a true estimate of this religious group due to various factors such as the a turbulent political situation, difficult media access, and a lack of resources to undertake such a project. While there are difficulties in estimating where Shia live, the man noted that most Shia live in Sana'a, but there are Shia communities found throughout the country in provinces such as Ibb, Aden, Taiz, and Sada'a.

The interviewee was asked about relations between the Shia community and other communities in the country and he replied by saying that the Shia in Yemen deal with groups on the foundation of respecting others, forgiveness, and free thinking. With that being said he noted that in the past there have been threats, killings, and other types of violence against Twelver communities. This situation came to its worst point during the height of the fighting between Houthi insurgents and government forces between 2004 and 2011. During the fighting between the two groups many Shia civilians would be arrested based on the suspicion of supporting the Houthis. Although there have been problems between the government and various Shia communities, the man noted that there aren't currently any Shia in jail because of their religious beliefs to his knowledge. Most of the conflicts that are witnessed today in Yemen happen either on a personal or tribal level, not on the basis of religious affiliation. The interviewee does worry though that the Houthis may try to impose some of their religious practices on other Shia groups in the country.

When asked about the presence of human rights organizations that are working on the behalf of Shia populations in the country, the interviewee stated that there currently weren't but there are a variety of charitable and social organizations that are run by Shia²⁰.

Chapter 3: The Wahhabi Movement in Yemen after 1970

3.1 The end of the Civil War

The end of the civil war which overthrew the imamate in Yemen was a loss for Saudi Arabia, the imamate's largest supporter. This loss was countered by a large increase in Wahhabi influence in the area. This influence ranged from schools that were created to rival Zaydi schools, to mosques that were created for the same reason. This influence would create tensions between the two communities and would culminate in the destruction of Zaydi shrines and attacks on Shia families.

3.2 Wahhabi Beliefs about Shia

Wahhabism is an ultra-conservative branch of Sunni Islam and their beliefs toward Shia are derogatory and in many cases encourage violence against them. For example Ali al- Ahmed, a notable human rights activist with the Saudi Institute, stated that there have been many Wahhabi clerics who have called for Shia to be killed, deported, and barred for working. Some of these teachings have made it into school curriculums, which are run through the Saudi Ministry of Education. Ali Al-Ahmed has noted in an interview that a 1993 middle school textbook published by the Saudi Ministry of Education that called Shia derogatory terms²¹. This textbook prompted many Shia to withdraw from school in protest. The beliefs espoused by these clerics and that are

included in these textbooks are exported throughout the world through Saudi establish institutes like their scientific schools²².

3.3 Scientific Schools

When the civil war ends, Sarah Phillips who authored *Cracks in the Yemeni System* writes that a number of "scientific institutes" which are "religious school propagating the ideas of the puritanical Sunni Islam adhered to in neighboring Saudi Arabia" appear around Sada'a. Phillips notes that these schools were informally controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood and financed by Saudi Arabia²³.

3.4 Conclusion

Wahhabi doctrine advocates violence against Shia, it also calls for similar forms of violence against non-Muslim groups as well. As an underrepresented group throughout the Middle East, Shia Muslims tend to be at higher risk because there tends to be less global scrutiny against groups that are responsible for crimes against Shia populations.

Chapter 4: Houthi Movement

4.1 Origins

This conflict draws its origins from disagreements between a group of Zaydis in Sada'a who are followers of Hussein Barredin al-Huthi and Ali Abdullah Saleh the former president of Yemen. The militant group created under Huthi was originally designed to act as Saleh's counter to the expanding Wahhabi influence in Yemen, but the concerns of Huthi's followers shifted to the government. This conflict would culminate in six wars between the Huthis and the government from 2004 until 2009 that would polarize the country, create an internally displaced persons crisis in the north, and inflict a large number of civilian casualties. Despite what major media outlets report, it is important to know that the Huthis are not representative of the Shia population in Yemen, nor do they have the support of the majority of Shia in the country. The Sada'a wars and the current Houthi campaign has resulted in numerous human rights violations by both Huthis and government forces. Since the Houthis claim to not be a religious organization and have not targeted people based on religious beliefs, their actions have not been included in this report.



4.2 Houthi Support

Cathrine Sakdam writes in *New Eastern Outlook* that while the recent Houthi campaign which culminated in the group taking effective control of Sana'a has gallivanted a large amount of support, it is the general discontent with the Yemeni government that outweighs the support for the movement. The Houthis emerged from a socio-political fracture in Yemeni society roughly a decade ago and it is that same type of fracture that has allowed for it to conduct this successful campaign. The best example of this is that the Houthi takeover was sparked by a sharp increase in the price of fuel in the country which sparked widespread protests. One main demand of the Houthis was for the immediate reduction of the price of fuel through the restoration of fuel

subsidies. It is necessary to not confuse the desire for Yemenis to see change in governance with outright support for the Houthi movement²⁴.

4.3 Conclusion

As mentioned earlier in this report, Shia disproportionately lack representation. The Houthi movement which has tried to speak on behalf of Shia in the country has effectively misrepresented that community. The association of Shia in Yemen with Houthis will dissuade the international community from looking at human rights violations against this population as a viable issue. Without support for moderate Shia then they will be overtaken by extremist groups like the Houthis⁴.

Chapter 5: Official Violations

5.1 Illegal Detentions and Disappearances

The Yemeni government is notorious for arbitrary detentions. The United States' Department of State's 2013 report on human rights practices notes that there were reports of politically motivated disappearances of people with ties to establishments that are critical of the government²⁵. While precise evidence is scarce, Human Rights Watch reported in September of 2014 that Khaled al-Junaidi, a human rights activist who was a part of the Southern Separatist Movement. The whereabouts of the activist at the time of this writing were still unknown. Genocide network noted that at the height of the Sada'a wars in 2008 Yemeni security forces had carried out enforced disappearances both targeted and random on Zaydis whom were suspected to be supporting the Houthis²⁶.

- *Disappearance of Yasir al-Wazir*
 - *On June 5, 2008 Yasir al-Wazir left his home to pray at a mosque in the area but did not return home. When his family received word that he had been arrested they went to the local police to inquire about his arrest and secure his release. When they asked an officer at the station about Yasir, the officer asked the family "how does your son pray, with his arms by his side (the Zaydi prayer style) or with his arms crossed (the Shafi prayer style)". When Yasin's father told the officer that Yasin was Zaydi and a preacher at a Zaydi mosque the officer directed the family to the office of Political Security²⁷.*

While Human Rights Watch notes that many people in Yasir's situation are eventually released, those who are imprisoned are not usually formally charged with a crime and do not face trial. These acts against the Zaydi population violate principles of due process and equal treatment before the law and cause immense grief to the families of the disappeared.

Not only have there been illegal disappearances of Zaydis, but there have been unlawful detentions of members of this group as well on allegations of supporting the Houthis. Many of those detained have been in prison for months at a time without a trial. The Yemeni government arrested thousands of people in connection with the uprisings in 2011 and many of them weren't released until the next year, the State Department reports.

5.2 Conclusion

The rights violations included in this section show how the political developments over the last decade have been detrimental for the Shia population of Yemen. In the Yemeni government's conflict with the Houthis, many innocent Shia were thrown into prison and kidnapped on the sole

²⁴Houthi Support <http://journal-neo.org/2014/09/26/supporting-the-houthis-who-stands-behind-yemen-s-new-dissidents/>

basis of their religious affiliation. The Yemeni government which has assumed responsibility for all of those living within its borders has taken advantage of its massive authority and used it to exploit Shia for their political benefit.⁵

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The tenure of President Saleh witnessed a plethora of human rights violations against the Shia community and the transitional government has done little to stem the violence. Shrine destruction, restrictions on religious expression, and acts of violence taking against Zaydis have created an unsafe atmosphere for them.

With this transitional government, the fate of the Zaydi community can either improve or deteriorate. The National Dialogue Conference had attendance from most facets of society which is a great step forward. It is now up to the Yemeni government and all relevant stakeholders to uphold the principles agreed upon in this conference.

Shia Rights Watch hopes this report can help increase awareness about the severity of the situation in Yemen and the need for all relevant stakeholders to take the necessary action needed to ensure the safety and security of the Zaydi community.

Chapter 7: Recommendations

7.1 International Organizations

- *Send and manage humanitarian aid*
- *Demand the disarmament of all militias in the country*
- *Conduct a full investigation of the disappearances, and murders conducted by the Yemeni government against the Zaydi community since 1970*
- *Send the names of armed group members who participated in mass murders and forced migrations to the International Criminal Court and to the local authorities*
- *Send the names of any past or present government officials involved in human rights violations to the International Criminal Court*
- *Bolster human rights training within Yemen and promote religious tolerance among all sects and faiths*
- *Rebuild shrines and nominate them for World Heritage Site status with UNESCO*

7.2 The Yemeni Government

- *Ensure government funds are properly distributed to all areas of the country*
- *Demand and ensure the disarmament of all militias around the country*
- *Conduct a full investigation of disappearances, murders, acts of vandalism, and restrictions of religious expression by the government and militias towards the Zaydi community*
- *Release all of those who have been illegally detained*

²⁵ U.S. Department of State report <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208632.pdf>

²⁶ Amnesty International Report <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE31/017/2013/en/59680e0c-bea1-44d9-ad9d-43fb3b31257d/mde310172013en.pdf>

²⁷ Disappearance of Yasir al-Wazir

- *Allow international human rights organizations to send in prominent monitors to investigate and monitor the human rights situation in the country*
- *Protect all minorities, and guarantee the right to legal representation for all*
- *Protect historical and holy sites*
- *Ensure the safe passage and delivery of humanitarian aid to impoverished people throughout the country*
- *Establish independent and impartial bodies to investigate and punish those responsible for deaths, torture, and mistreatment*
- *Promote tolerance and respect*
- *Repeal any laws that limit the free expression of religious beliefs in the country*

7.3 The Gulf Corporation Council

As the broker of the deal that initiated the transition period in Yemen, the GCC must:

- *Hold those who spread anti-Shia rhetoric via media outlets accountable for their deeds*
- *Halt funding to militias operating in Yemen*
- *Pressure the Yemeni government to respect the inalienable rights of all groups within the country*

