



Media absent from Yemen's forgotten war

By Maysaa Shuja al-Deen

Spring, 2009. Restricting access to information can be as serious a threat to journalism as overt censorship or government persecution. The ongoing insurgency in Yemen's northern governorate of Sa'ada is one example of how a state's attempt to enforce an information blackout has helped hide and sustain a conflict that has festered over four years, killing thousands and leaving a city destroyed, and continuing to stoke fears of a return to violence.

The Sa'ada governorate, located in Yemen's mountainous northern region on the border with Saudi Arabia and home to around 750 thousand people, has witnessed stop and go wars since 2004.¹ Precise numbers of the dead and wounded are unknown because no organization, national or international, has been allowed full access to the area to make an independent account of the violence, although most estimates put the death toll well into the thousands.

Yemen is a Muslim country; the majority follow the Shafi'i branch of Sunni Islam while the remainder are Zaidi Shi'a concentrated in the country's mountainous north.² Zaidi Imams ruled parts of Yemen for hundreds of years prior to the 1962 revolution, yet nationalist politics and state education efforts had muted their influence to a large extent by the 1990s.

Amid growing Sunni-Shi'a tensions after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and concerns over Iranian influence in the Arab world, a Zaidi revivalist movement led by a group known as the Huthis emerged in Yemen's Sa'ada governorate in 2004, named after their charismatic leader Hussein Badreddin Al Huthi.³ The group, who also referred to themselves as *al-Shabab al-Mu'amin* (The Believing Youth), resisted government attempts to dismantle Zaidi schools and infrastructure, which triggered the first outbreak of violence in June 2004.

No comprehensive account of the ensuing rounds of fighting has been made, yet Human Rights Watch estimates that 130 thousand have been displaced and sixty thousand have taken refuge in safe areas of the town of Sa'ada where they receive limited assistance in camps and private homes. Seventy thousand others in remote areas and towns remain outside the reach of aid agencies. Several towns including al-Assaify, home to two thousand residents, have been completely destroyed by land and aerial bombardment. Yemen's president, Ali Abdallah Saleh, declared the war over in July 2008, yet reports of ongoing violence continue to emerge.⁴

While the conflict is at core a local power struggle between the central government and the breakaway Zaidi group, there are a number of wider factors at play. There have long been charges of growing Salafi sympathies within key members of the Yemeni government and armed forces, for example Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the president's powerful half-brother and commander of the armed forces.⁵ While the level of Salafi influence is difficult to gauge accurately, these allegations are explosive given charges that Iran is supporting its Shi'a coreligionists in Yemen by funding the Huthi rebellion. Even without conclusive proof that Sunni Salafi antipathy toward Shi'a communities helps drive the fighting, these claims over sectarian-driven funding of the conflict demonstrate how many see the Sa'ada insurgency through the prism of the regional Sunni versus Shi'a narrative.

Controversy over the U.S. role in Yemen also animates the conflict to some extent. Shortly after the September 11 attacks, Yemen's President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, visited Washington to initiate closer counterterrorism cooperation with America. In 2003, the Huthi rebels challenged this relationship by raising anti-American slogans at Friday prayers, seemingly in hopes of drawing attention to their cause and putting pressure on the government to respond forcefully. Some argue that Yemen's pro-American stance has also resulted in less pressure to comply with humanitarian law in the Sa'ada conflict.

In addition, competition within the Yemeni army between Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and Ahmed Ali Saleh, the president's son, both seen as possible candidates to replace the aging president, could be intensifying the conflict as they vie to outdo each other with battlefield successes.

Media blackout and journalist persecution

Sa'ada is a remote mountainous part of Yemen with limited access by road, which has made it relatively easy for the government to restrict access to foreign and domestic media and other observers. "The blackout of media on Sa'ada which was imposed by the Yemeni government is the strongest in the world," said Gerry Simpson a spokesman for the Human Rights Watch refugee program.

Print and television media in Yemen have been prohibited from running photographs or news items about the war. "As soon as the war started, the state prevented any journalists from entering Sa'ada, and halted the [mobile phone] connection coverage. Only during the fourth round of fighting did they allow one mobile network to operate, so that they could better monitor the calls," said journalist Mageed al-Garafi. When the Yemeni newspapers *al-Shoura* and *al-Shar'a* disregarded the censorship and ran stories on the conflict, their papers were shut down and editors arrested.

Human Rights Watch reported that the government had instituted the unusual requirement for their team to get permission from the Interior Ministry to enter the Sa'ada governorate; the permission never came.⁶ A team from Doctors Without Borders

has also withdrawn from Yemen because it was not allowed to deploy sufficient aid to meet the needs of the injured.

While these restrictions kept the international aid and human rights organizations at bay, local journalists had better luck getting into Sa'ada. Journalist Mageed al-Garafi used credentials from his second job as a schoolteacher to get past security checkpoints and into the warzone. He recounted impressions from his March 2008 visit:

"The people welcomed us happily despite the difficult conditions; beside every house there is a white tent where children and women are living a miserable life.... Most of them had lost their houses and incomes because their farms were destroyed. The wounded were being treated in clinics that lack even the simplest medical capabilities."

"When we met the Secretary General of the Yemeni Red Crescent, he cried from his inability to help the displaced people, he said that there are people dying from hunger, we don't have any supplies, all we have are tents," al-Garafi continued.

According to many accounts, the ongoing violence has turned the residents of Sa'ada against the army and state: "they killed my sister who was 9 months old; I swear I will make Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar pay for this," one resident told al-Garafi.

The government also attempted to restrict photography in the governorate. "I tried to take photos of the displaced people but security men ran after me to take my camera. They said that they have orders from Ali Mohsen to ban any photos of the tents of the displaced. We can't get the information to begin with, but even if we did we couldn't publish it; no editor-in-chief would take the risk. For instance, no papers published photos of the Thahian massacre which happened in the first day of the fifth war (June-July, 2008). Some newspapers published a few small and blurred photos to test the [government] reaction," said al-Garafi.

In addition, there are signs that mobile phones are being monitored with an eye towards restricting the spread of information. During the fifth round of fighting in summer, 2008 some journalists reported being questioned by authorities about calls they received during the war or having their numbers disconnected altogether.

Outside Sa'ada, the Yemeni government has cracked down on bloggers that have criticized the campaign. On his news website Yemenhurr.net, blogger-journalist Louai al-Moid criticized the humanitarian situation in Sa'ada, ascribing cynical motives to the war effort: "it's just temporary until the elections are finished; the war has created a group of weapon dealers, which have grown up to be a strong pressure group on the Yemeni government and have succeeded in influencing the decision makers in Yemen."⁷

Al-Moid was subsequently arrested and held for 74 days for his role in running the Yemenhurr website, which was then blocked in Yemen. "We suffered from torture; they interrogated me for more than sixteen hours without sleep, but I was lucky that my

father has a relationship with the authorities so I was released after being forced to sign papers," al-Moid said.

The government has also sporadically blocked the popular Arabic language blogging website Maktoob.com, a platform that hosts more than 2,000 Yemeni blogs.⁸

Perhaps the most notorious case of the violence against journalists is Abdel Karim al-Khaiwani, editor of an opposition news website and former editor of the newspaper *al-Shoura*. He suffered multiple assaults and was arrested many times; the final time his home was raided and he was hauled before a State Security Court on vague terrorism charges that carried a possible death penalty. Following his release, al-Khaiwani and his family were threatened with death if he continued to write against the Yemeni regime.

These cases are hardly isolated incidents. The Yemeni rights watchdog *Bilakoyood* (Unrestricted) has documented and analyzed over 112 cases of censorship and violence against media in the year 2007.

Huthi media presence on the rise

Despite the extensive government efforts to block information from getting out and restrict internal communications, there are indications that the Huthi rebels are engaging in an increasingly sophisticated media campaign as they consolidate their power in some areas of Sa'ada. Recently, the group has established a media war department to counter what is being published by the army and the official news media. They also film some of their operations and distribute them on compact disc.

By some accounts, the Huthis now rule three of the twelve directorates that compose the Sa'ada governorate and have announced plans to provide free water and electricity services, although there is not yet any infrastructure to do so.

Yemen, which represented for many a hopeful experiment in democracy following its 1990 unification, continues to weaken as perceptions of its government's legitimacy decline. Ali Abdallah Saleh has remained president of reunified the Yemeni state for nearly twenty years, facilitated by a series of constitutional amendments. The parliamentary elections originally set for 27 April 2009 have been postponed for two years due to deadlocked negotiations over electoral procedures. The delay further weakens the legitimacy of the state and prolongs the atmosphere of crisis, which in turn fuels the Sa'ada conflict.

Antiterrorism cooperation with the U.S. and fears around the world that Yemen could collapse into a failed state are the few cards Saleh has left to play as he seeks to hold off international pressure to ease the humanitarian situation in Sa'ada. In the meantime, the media blackout in the governorate and persecution of journalists who violate it look set to hold steady or increase.

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¹ The best available outline of the facts of the conflict is available in a report by Human Rights Watch. “Invisible Civilians: The Challenge of Humanitarian Access in Yemen’s Forgotten War.” 19 November 2008.

² One estimate puts the Sunni and Shi‘a populations in Yemen at 55% 42% respectively, but others vary widely.

³ The Yemeni government announced that al-Huthi was killed in a June 2004 raid, but this has not been independently confirmed.

⁴ For example, on 30 March 2009, al-Jazeera reported a new round of bomb blasts and violence in Sa‘ada.

⁵ Salafism is a conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam that preaches a return to the behaviors of the Prophet and his companions. Salafis are believed to constitute a small minority of the population, although there have long been accusations that the state apparatus, including top army officials subscribe to Salafi views, but that there is no independent evidence of this. See for example: “Britons’ killers ‘lined to Yemen army chief” *The Sunday Times*. 8 May 2005.

⁶ “Invisible Civilians.” p 8.

⁷ Al-Moid described his writings and associations with to me in a personal interview. More details on his case available here: “Yemeni man held by police for 3 weeks without charges” *The Yemen Observer*. 22 July 2008.

⁸ For an outline of the changing dynamics of web filtering in the country see, [Yemen, country profile](#). OpenNet Initiative. 9 May 2007.