



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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

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

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Religious Freedom in Houthi-Controlled Areas of Yemen

Overview

Religious freedom conditions in Yemen continue to deteriorate after nearly eight years of war, particularly in the one-third of northern Yemen controlled by Ansar Allah, the Houthi rebel movement. Despite not having made major territorial gains in the last year, the Houthis continued to perpetrate extreme violations of freedom of religion or belief with significant impacts, especially on religious minorities and women.

This factsheet outlines religious freedom conditions in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. Houthi governance justified on religious grounds is putting severe pressure on religious minorities including Christians, Baha'is, Jews, and non-religious persons. The Houthis use a panoply of tools and tactics — such as forced employee contracts, oral directives, deputizing civilians, propaganda, indoctrination camps, and education curricula — to harass, defame, and incite hatred against vulnerable faith communities. Furthermore, the Houthi movement continues to spread its dominance and control over areas in northern Yemen through its systematic religious indoctrination campaign that reaches across multiple sectors, including education, health, and detention facilities, as well as civil society. Religious minority life in Houthi-controlled areas faces near-total extinction; Houthi targeting of Baha'is, Christians, Jews, and non-religious persons has compelled many to flee to the south or leave Yemen entirely seeking safety and refuge abroad. The few remaining members of each community stay hidden due to threats of Houthi harassment, intimidation, and violence.

The situation of women living under Houthi rule has also grown more dire. Authorities have increasingly imposed policies with a religious underpinning that restrict women's religious freedom. These include male guardian requirements for travel and forced segregation in public spaces.

Background

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. In [February 2021](#), the Houthis [launched](#) a “[devastating offensive](#)” on Marib governate against Saudi-backed forces aligned with former Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansour al-Hadi. Fighting between the Saudi-led coalition and Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen continues to harm civilians, drive displacement in the region, and restrict humanitarian access despite [ongoing efforts](#) to reach a political settlement to end the conflict.

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'afri 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 the Houthi movement and the Iranian government 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 various religious affiliations and identities.

In 2022, after nearly eight years of war, Yemenis experienced some decrease in violence and more humanitarian support. A UN-mediated truce began in April 2022, [timed](#) to start during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. That truce expired in October. U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen [Tim Lenderking](#) has repeatedly [echoed](#) international calls for a truce renewal, condemned destabilizing Houthi actions, and continues to engage in efforts to resolve the ongoing crisis in Yemen.

Even during the brief cessation of hostilities last year, the Houthis continued their [assault](#) on civilians, including

egregious religious freedom violations. The UN Group of Experts [reported](#) in September 2022 that Houthi leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi said publicly that Baha'is, Jews, and other religious minorities “don't want to coexist.... They want to take away the sovereignty of Islam.” Houthi authorities have targeted these minority religious groups with disappearances, arbitrary detentions, forced indoctrination, and unlawful confiscation of property and assets, among other violations.

Forced Indoctrination of Houthi Religious Ideology

Since 2014, the Houthi movement has carried out a systematic campaign to indoctrinate civilians living under its control with the group's particular religious ideology. This effort is far-reaching across multiple sectors with significant religious freedom impacts. For instance, in Houthi-controlled areas, authorities have set up “[summer camps](#)” at mosques and schools to indoctrinate civilians with Houthi religious ideology, even when these trainings were contrary to the individuals' own religious beliefs.

Since November 2022, public-sector employees have been [forced](#) to sign a government “[Code of Conduct](#)” based on the beliefs and statements of Houthi leaders, as well as the group's interpretation of the Qur'an. The code disallows any diversity in perspective, political affiliation, belief, religion, or sect. Houthi authorities consider any violations of the code as treason and grounds for punishment. Employees who refuse to sign [risk](#) salary cuts or being fired.

Prison officials also [forced detainees](#) to take religious trainings based on the Houthi interpretation of Islam as a condition for their release, punishing any who refused to attend prayer rituals by placing them in solitary confinement, withholding food, and forbidding family visits. Houthi authorities have also reportedly forced the children of prisoners, particularly Christian converts, to take lessons that encourage hate against faith communities that reject Houthi religious teachings.

Targeting of Religious Minorities

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. Many Yemeni Baha'is have fled Houthi territory to seek safety and refuge in regions controlled by the Southern Transitional Council.

Houthi authorities arrested Baha'i community leader [Hamid bin Haydara](#) on December 3, 2013, and held him without charges. 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. These [six Baha'is](#), who Houthi authorities unjustly detained, tortured, looted of their assets, and later deported from the country, have now been branded as fugitives, even though the condition the Houthis gave for their release was their immediate exile.

In March 2021, the Houthis [blocked](#) Baha'is from access to their bank accounts, including the community's spokesman Abdullah al-Olafi. At present, 24 Baha'is are under indictment by Houthi authorities. In December, the Houthis [confiscated](#) Baha'i land, property, and assets in Tihama.

Since its 2014 takeover, the Houthis have spread anti-Baha'i propaganda through state-run media and public speeches. In public remarks from March 2018, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi [called on](#) followers to "defend" Yemen from Baha'is, to whom he [referred](#) as "infidels" and "collaborators with Israel." More recently during a [televised speech](#), al-Houthi called the Baha'i community an enemy of Islam, describing the group as a politically invented religion seeking "to remove Islam and the law of Islam from the affairs of life." The Houthis have also spread false information about Yemeni Baha'is through the educational curriculum. This defamation of Baha'is has been part of a [larger Houthi campaign](#) to institutionalize the indoctrination of children and youth through coordinated changes to curricula taught in Houthi-controlled areas.

Christians

The Christian community in Yemen once numbered [approximately 40,000](#), including both Yemenis and expatriates. Current [estimates](#) project that only a [few thousand Christians](#) remain in the country, as many continue to flee facing serious religious freedom violations. Christians who remain in Yemen are [unable](#) to worship safely in public. Yemeni law prohibits conversion from Islam to any other religion, including Christianity. In this context, Yemeni Christian converts from Islam face severe persecution, including ongoing harassment and fears of arbitrary detention. In prison, some Christians have been [forced](#) to recant their faith under extreme duress.

Christian convert women report being subject to physical beatings and brutalization by Houthi security guards, who have also threatened female detainees with violence against their children and families. After being subject

to torture in Houthi detention, Huda Ali Obaid fled Sana'a because of Houthi threats while in detention that authorities would marry off her daughter to a chief Houthi leader as her atonement for the sin of leaving Islam.

In November 2022, the family of Bashir Al-Bakari — a Christian convert previously arrested twice on charges of apostasy and preaching Christianity — was safely evacuated to Egypt where they reunited with Al-Bakari after suffering from harassment and threats. Houthi authorities continued to detain Christian prisoner Saeed Abdo Abulbaqi on terror-related charges despite his deteriorating health condition.

Also, Houthi security forces last year detained more than [200 Christians](#), mostly foreign workers from Africa, whom authorities have demonized as "foreign agents."

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. Heightened pressure during and after Israel's establishment in 1948 led to the [mass displacement](#) of Yemen's Jewish community. By the early 1990s, under the rule of former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, only a few hundred Jews remained in the country. During their anti-government insurgency in the early 2000s, Houthi authorities deployed antisemitism as a political tool by threatening the Jewish community and destroying Jewish homes. The Houthi slogan itself contains the phrase "curses upon the Jews." Facing pressure from the Houthis, many Jews left Yemen for other [countries](#) in the Middle East, Europe, and North America.

Over the last decade, facing Houthi pressure, Yemen's Jewish community has gradually decreased. In 2013, following the [murder](#) of a Jewish man, Harun Yusuf Zindani, 30 Jews [departed](#) Yemen for Israel. There were reportedly between 1,500 and 2,000 Jews in the country in 2016. By 2018, only [50](#) Jews remained in Yemen. In both August 2020 and January 2021, Yemeni Jewish families [left](#) for the United Arab Emirates, where they were united with family members. In March 2021, the Houthis [expelled](#) 13 Jewish families from Sana'a.

Jewish prisoner of conscience [Libi Marhabi](#) is reportedly the [last remaining Jew](#) in Yemen. 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. The U.S. State Department has [reiterated](#) previous calls for Marhabi's release.

Houthi imams and Islamic scholars have continued to use the antisemitic slogan, “Allah is great, death to America, death to Israel, curses upon the Jews, victory to Islam.” This slogan is taught to Yemeni children at aforementioned Houthi “summer camps,” and videos have circulated on social media of Houthi militiamen chanting it while giving the Nazi [salute](#). Houthi-controlled media broadcast antisemitic statements and sermons. In June 2022, Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi [described](#) Jewish neighborhoods during the time of the Prophet Muhammad “as known for [their] dirt, filth and foul smell” and claimed that the Prophet told his followers “not to be like the Jews.”

Non-Religious Persons

Currently, there are [no known cases](#) of non-religious individuals — including humanists and secularists — facing persecution in Houthi-held areas. However, the lack of reporting underscores how dangerous it is for those who do not adhere to any religion to publicly affirm their identity and report on the Houthi movement’s crackdown on dissent. One secular Yemeni activist living outside the country notes that the lack of cases does not necessarily mean an absence of non-believers in territory controlled by the Houthis in northern Yemen.

Religious Restrictions on Women

Houthi restrictions on women’s autonomy on religious grounds is an [ongoing](#) issue in Yemen but has escalated severely in the past year. The Houthi movement continues to undermine the religious freedom of women and girls in northern Yemen — including in the Saada, Dhamar, Hodeidah and Hajjah governorates and the capital city of Sana’a — by imposing a *mahram* (male escort) requirement justified on religious grounds. The requirement mandates that all women in Houthi-controlled areas, including [non-Yemeni females](#) working for humanitarian and aid groups, be accompanied by a male while traveling. Although a *mahram* requirement is not formally a part of Yemeni law, authorities currently enforce it through [oral directives](#). As a result, women have been unable to enjoy the basic freedom of movement with authorities requiring the consent of male guardians for travel in and between Houthi-controlled areas.

The *mahram* restriction has made it especially difficult for women from minority religious communities, particularly Christian convert women, to flee ongoing persecution and threats to physical safety. Furthermore, women were [harassed](#) and threatened with physical violence by Houthi guards at checkpoints for traveling alone. Authorities [banned](#) women from traveling independently through Sana’a airport without a male escort, including female aid workers employed by NGOs. These policies not only [restrict](#) women but also men who do not consent to act as mahrams. Male escorts are required to verify their identity to determine the legality of their guardianship. The [process](#) can take several hours at certain checkpoints and can also involve harassment for the male escorts.

Throughout the summer of 2022, Houthi authorities [forced](#) women to close their businesses, ordered the closure of organizations that cater exclusively to women, and banned the mixing of men and women in public venues. The Houthis also mobilized all-female police units, called *zeinabiyat*, to suppress, abuse, and arrest women who reject Houthi ideology. These units perpetrated a range of religious freedom [violations](#), including the forced sectarian education of Yemeni women by usurping mosques, private homes, and schools to promote Houthi teachings of Islam.

Conclusion

Houthi rule in areas of northern Yemen has created extreme challenges to freedom of religion or belief for minority faith communities and women. The gradual erosion of the presence of minority communities and of women’s freedom in Houthi-controlled areas through authorities’ continued legal and political pressure undermines the credibility of the Houthis’ commitment to a sustainable political agreement and is doing irreparable damage to a country with a millennia-long history of religious diversity.

Each year since 2018, and most recently in December 2022, 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 to facilitate a resolution to the protracted conflict in Yemen, it should advocate for religious freedom concerns in Houthi-controlled areas to be addressed as part of a long-term agreement, and work for the release of religious prisoners of conscience.



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