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Echoes of a Scream: US Drones and Articulations of the Houthi *Sarkha* Slogan in Yemen

Waleed F. Mahdi

Our villages are poor—no education, no hospitals, no roads, nor any services. Of all the progress and advances in the modern world, only these deadly missiles reached us. Such strikes ... only invoke people's indignation of both the Yemeni government and America.

—a Yemeni whose village was impacted by US drones¹

Introduction

The second decade of the twenty-first century both rejuvenated hopes and dashed aspirations of many Yemenis in producing past due political changes without jeopardizing national unity and societal cohesion. Masses and militias poured to the public arena in 2011 and competed for rescue narratives to secure the people's demands for livelihood and dignity. The unity of their demand for regime change forced long-term president Ali Abdullah Saleh out of his position in 2012 and resulted in a National Dialogue Conference (2012–14) under President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. The outcomes of the concerted efforts to secure peaceful transition were a new constitution and a proposal for a Yemeni federal governance system of six semiautonomous regions. Houthis, a sociopolitical movement in the northernmost part of Yemen primarily from Saada Governorate—a.k.a., Ansarullah (Supporters of God)—utilized their growing alliances and disrupted the process through multisite armed confrontations with various tribal, partisan, sectarian, and military forces. They eventually controlled the Yemeni capital (Sana'a) on September 21, 2014, before advancing southward to impose their control over other governorates. On March 26, 2015, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—with initial support from some Arab states, the United States, and the United Kingdom—intervened in the Yemeni affairs through, what Isa Blumi calls, a “Saudi/Anglo-American coalition”² to restore the legitimacy of President Hadi.³ Since then and until the moment of this writing, Yemen has been locked in a bloody civil

war between the de facto rule of Houthis and their local alliances, backed by quasi support from the Islamic Republic of Iran, and a loose opposition block in support of Hadi, enacted by direct Saudi and Emirati military interferences and supported by the US military-industrial complex along with local tribal, partisan, and sectarian power players.

This chapter predates the 2011 revolutionary moment and the turbulence of its aftermath and draws attention to certain post-9/11 destabilizing conditions in Yemen that contributed to the post-2011 collapse of concerted efforts to institute peaceful transition of governance. More specifically, the chapter examines the Houthi sensational slogan *Allāhu 'akbar; al-mawt li-'Amrikā; al-mawt li-'Isrā'īl; al-la'nah 'alā 'l-Yahūd; an-naṣr lil-'Islām*, which roughly translates as “God is Great; Death to America; Death to Israel; Damn the Jews; Victory to Islam,” within the context of a growing public search for agency from implications of the US drone program in Yemen. Locally known as *sarkha* (scream), this slogan, I argue, is paradoxical because it both represents a cry for territorial autonomy from the disruptive nature of the US-led “war on terror” campaign and serves as a political tool that has fueled the Houthis’ monopoly of power. Since its inception in 2002 within the context of US-led enhanced militarized presence in several Arab and Muslim countries, the *sarkha* has transcended its rhetorical value and permeated calls to violence, further transpiring along tribal, sectarian, and partisan lines in Yemen. It transpired from a rhetorical chant in religious gatherings into an activist outcry at rooftops and mosques, and, later on, a battlefield tune played while blasting homes of the rivalry. Thus, this chapter points to how the *sarkha* has directly served the Houthis’ solidification of power but not without rendering the *sarkha*’s context of struggle against violations of Yemen’s sovereignty meaningless.

While it is tempting to draw on the *sarkha*’s religious sentiment and interpret it as a sensational continuation of radical Islamist Sayyid Qutb’s polarization of Islam and the United States, this chapter cautions against conceiving the *sarkha* as one modeled on the Qutbian conception of religious struggle.⁴ Paul Berman’s and Lawrence Wright’s popular reflections on the relationship between Qutb’s religio-political narrative and Al-Qaeda violence, problematic and reductive as they may be, cannot constitute the only primary lens through which readers in the West could view the relationship between the *sarkha* and violence in the Yemeni context.⁵ Relying on existing counterterrorism literature on religious radical narratives and politically motivated violence may risk writing off the *sarkha*’s local context as simply a manifestation of a people who hate Americans, Jews, and the West. With multiple audiences in mind, the *sarkha* not only reflects a critique of American and Israeli hegemony in the Middle East, but it also reduces complex geopolitics to simple religious identifications to win support from core Houthi supporters along with the broader Yemeni public. It is worth noting that Houthis hail from a different sectarian background, that is, *Zaydi Shia*, as opposed to Qutb’s Sunni background. The Houthi revolutionary mission is based on reviving *Zaidiyyah* and pushing against the Sunnification of the Zaydi lands. If anything, Houthis have targeted Salafis, both quietists and Qutb-inspired radicals, as enemies of Islam and branded their religious mission as one based on the holy book of *Qur’an* as opposed to *Hadith* (Prophet Sayings), thereby shifting away from a key

pillar of Sunni religious tradition. Nonetheless, the sensational but broad nature of the *sarkha* shows an attempt to reconcile this sectarian difference, at least rhetorically.

This is not to dismiss readings of the *sarkha*'s visible manifestation of Houthi-based sectarianism. It may be true that the *sarkha* has functioned as a tool for what appears to be sectarian violence in Yemen. The omnipresent flag decorating the machinery of the Houthis' quasi-military wing renders the *sarkha* emblazoned with words and colors that emulate the Iranian post-Islamic revolution flag (Figure 11.1). In their territorial advance throughout the country, Houthis used the *sarkha* as a sound track in sectarian-influenced treacherous battlefields, political marches, and religious gatherings. Blowing up the houses of their rivalry while reciting the *sarkha* has been traumatic for many Yemenis who have struggled to understand the relationship between the slogan's components—that is, “United States,” “Israel,” “Jews,” “Islam”—and the very Yemeni identity of their victims. However, the *sarkha* transcends this sectarian undertone as it mediates a specific Yemeni sociopolitical context that has cultivated the Houthis' broader appeals to independence from foreign interference and demands for self-control during a political transformation process that has recycled grievance, disenfranchisement, and polarization. At the core of this context is the US drone policy in the country, which has obliterated the public faith in status quo politics and shaped venues for alternative narratives. Rather than simply reading the *sarkha* as a mere indicator of Iran's influence on Houthis, the slogan could also be read as a reflection of a transcultural search for anti-imperial resistance rhetoric inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This is not to discard Iran's expansionist strategy in the Arab world or Houthis' reception of this influence; it rather confirms Houthis' localized forms of identity and agency.

Therefore, rather than basing my analysis of the *sarkha* on such an early model of radical thinking of Islam and the West as Qutb's, I build on Mark LeVine and Bryan Reynolds's definition of “theater of immediacy” as a “cultural creation and performance for an intended audience that is not merely emergent—that is, in the process of formation—but ... ‘emurgent’ (emergent + urgent): developing rapidly and in the context of intense sociopolitical struggle that destabilizes and even reconfigures previously dominant, congealed structures and networks of power and identity.”⁶

Figure 11.1 The *sarkha* slogan compared to the Iranian flag.

The Houthi *sarkha*, I argue, is emergent because of its ability to simultaneously capture the public pulse of anxiety around US interventions in Yemen since 9/11 and forge a space for a growing consciousness (formed out of realignment of sectarian, tribal, and regional alliances) that legitimizes violence as a necessary revolutionary means toward independence and sovereignty. Hence, the theater of immediacy for the *sarkha*, as presented in this chapter, theoretically stretches at crossroads of two disrupting moments in Yemeni contemporary history, that is, 9/11 and *Arab Spring*. It promotes a postcolonial rescue narrative that critiques the post-9/11 “war on terror” articulations in US foreign policy toward Yemen and a post-Arab Spring state of lawlessness that envelops the country as a proxy for a regional sectarian conflict while pushing its citizens to coalesce around subnational and transcultural identity-based memberships.

US Drones, Yemeni Lives

The presence of tolerance in Yemen or its lack thereof is informed by the fragile nature of the political revolutionary process since February 2011, which has fractured state power through military division, sectarian unrest, tribal conflict, regional disunity, and partisan polarization. At the core of this process has been a rising anxiety around the country’s sovereignty amid regional and international dictations, often guided by priorities unresponsive to local demands. In this context, the United States has advocated a paradoxical role in promoting peaceful transition of power through sustaining status quo politics in exchange for licensing its drone warfare against the threat of the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This is particularly articulated at the backdrop of a post-9/11 undefinable “war on terror” strategy that positions the United States as a prominent enemy of Yemeni indigenous rights to self-determination. The resulting sense of vulnerability among Yemenis has empowered certain localized critiques of the United States as an imperial power that does not necessarily occupy Yemeni territories but certainly employs technological advancements to dominate Yemen’s skies. This “verticalization of power,” to borrow Grégoire Chamayou’s words, “implies a form of above-the-ground authority in which everything—every individual, every house, every street, even the smallest event”—is available for violation.⁷

Since the attack on the navy destroyer USS *Cole* on October 12, 2000, at Aden harbor, Yemen has become a site of US strategic interest for the “war on terror” campaign. Prior to its closure in 2015, the US embassy in the country operated as a front for both diplomacy and homeland security. Perhaps the launch of drone strikes would constitute the epicenter of such engagements, leading to unprecedented hard power involvement that dealt a serious blow to the country’s sense of sovereignty. In fact, it was in Yemen where the first drone strike was launched outside of a declared war zone back on November 3, 2002, which resulted in killing six al-Qaeda suspects.⁸ In 2009, President Barack Obama authorized the launch of a systematic drone strike campaign in the country. It was not until June 15, 2012, when the administration disclosed its targeted killings campaign against the AQAP after consistent denial

of the operations.⁹ One year later, the White House released a fact sheet laying the standards and procedures for conducting drone strikes. Five criteria were established as conditions for the authorization of lethal force: (1) “near certainty that the terrorist target is present;” (2) “near certainty that non-combatants will not be injured or killed;” (3) “an assessment that capture is not feasible at the time of the operation;” (4) “an assessment that the relevant governmental authorities in the country where action is contemplated cannot or will not effectively address the threat to US persons;” and (5) “an assessment that no other reasonable alternatives exist to effectively address the threat to US persons.”¹⁰

There is an existing record that documents the inconsistencies between such drone-related standards and real-life practices.¹¹ The drone program has primarily relied on knowledge deficiency about Yemen’s local complexities, flawed conflation between local resistance groups and groups sworn to threaten US homeland security, and outright faulty intelligence data. Despite emphasis on “near certainty” of no civilian casualty, the drone program has also placed a heavy toll on Yemeni civilians. On July 1, 2016, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released official statistics of 473 strikes outside areas of active hostilities in the period January 20, 2009, and December 31, 2015, primarily in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. The report estimated combatant deaths in the range of 2372–2581 and noncombatant deaths in the range of only 64–116.¹² The gross understatement of civilian casualties in addition to establishing statistical ranges in reporting deaths both confirmed critics’ skepticism of the program’s moral legitimacy and operational efficiency.¹³ On March 6, 2018, President Donald Trump restricted this move for transparency by issuing an executive order that banned the release of information about drone operations.¹⁴

Al-Ma’ajalah Massacre (December 17, 2009) was one of the earliest examples that articulated the indiscriminate nature of US strikes in Yemen. Tomahawk cruise missiles hit a camp in al-Ma’ajalah village in Abyan governorate, which resulted in the death of at least forty-five civilians, including fifteen women and twenty-two children. Yemeni activist Farea al-Muslimi recounted the traumatic nature of the incident in a testimony at the US Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights & Human Rights, “The tribal leader and others tried to rescue the victims, but the bodies were so dismasted that it was impossible to differentiate between those of children, women, and their animals.”¹⁵ The incident shocked the Yemeni community whose government initially rejected any US role in the attacks, but later on revealed that the operation was the spark of a momentum of a new war tactic adopted by the Obama administration as the most practical and least costly. *WikiLeaks* revealed messages from the ex-president of Yemen, Ali Saleh, demanding the US government to deny any active engagement in the waged war against the AQAP in an attempt to assure the public about the sovereignty of their state.¹⁶

In his speech on drone policy, President Obama acknowledged the civilian causality of the program:

It is a hard fact that US strikes have resulted in civilian casualties, a risk that exists in every war. And for the families of those civilians, no words or legal construct

can justify their loss. For me, and those in my chain of command, those deaths will haunt us as long as we live, just as we are haunted by the civilian casualties that have occurred throughout conventional fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁷

This important recognition of civilian loss was, however, presented in a framework that projected the United States as a humanitarian power set to save Americans and Yemenis alike. “To do nothing in the face of terrorist networks,” President Obama argued, “would invite far more civilian casualties—not just in our cities at home and our facilities abroad, but also in the very places like Sana’a and Kabul and Mogadishu where terrorists seek a foothold.”¹⁸

President Obama gained support from President Hadi, who praised the drone technology for its effectiveness.¹⁹ Even Yemeni foreign minister, Abu Bakr al-Qirbi, described the drone strikes as a “necessary evil” and a “very limited affair.”²⁰ The Yemeni parliament and public, however, rejected these views. On December 15, 2013, the Yemeni parliament issued a non-binding vote “to stop” violations of “Yemeni airspace” and stressed “the importance of preserving innocent civilian lives against any attack and maintaining Yemeni sovereignty.”²¹ This political measure was significant in its symbolic gesture to the disenchanted public. “I believe that America is testing its lethal inventions in our poor villages because [it] cannot afford to do so at any place where human life has value,” once complained a Yemeni whose village was impacted by the drone program, “Here we are without value.”²²

A Human Rights Watch report investigating the drone attack of a wedding procession in Rad’a (December 12, 2013), which resulted in the death of twelve men and injury of fifteen others, illustrates the indiscriminate nature of this drone program.²³ Four Hellfire missiles hit a convoy of eleven vehicles during a counterterrorism operation in rural Yemen. Although initially celebrated as a successful strike against terrorists, ground reports verified that the procession consisted of civilians participating in a tribal event. Most civilian casualties in Yemen have been in part a result of such human errors in identifying potential targets; other cases are due to a double-tap practice that requires operators to follow the strike with another one to verify the elimination of the target, leading to the randomly killing civilian responders.

Echoes of the US strikes prompted the proliferation of resistance narratives against US violations of Yemen’s sovereignty. Youth-based efforts were peaceful in nature and were geared into political and artistic advocacy. In the aforementioned congressional testimony, for instance, the US-educated al-Muslimi captured the public frustration with the US paradoxical approach to Yemen by reflecting on the contradictory nature of his own personal experience as a witness to hovering drones. “I was torn between this great country that I love [US],” he stated, “and the drone above my head that could not differentiate between me and some AQAP militants.” Reflecting on the impact of drone strikes on Yemeni civilians, he continued:

The drone strikes are the face of America to many Yemenis. I have spoken to many victims of US drone strikes like a mother in Ja’ar who had to identify her innocent eighteen-year-old son’s body through a video in a stranger’s cellphone; or that father in Shakrah who held his four-and-six-year-old children as they died in his arms.²⁴

Mwatana for Human Rights is another important example of youth-based advocacy that has provided local-based reporting that has been critical of the US drone program.²⁵ Youth-based efforts have also advanced through art. Murad Subay's "12 Hours" graffiti campaign, for instance, invited fellow Yemeni graffiti artists to visually capture Yemenis' sufferings.²⁶ Perhaps the most iconic graffiti depicted was the one in which a little girl completed writing with her blood a question (in Arabic and English): Why did you kill my family? (Figure 11.2). This question gains more symbolic power if juxtaposed with Americans' post-9/11 most asked question "why did they hate us?," which rhetorically guided the US "war on terror" campaign.

Militants rushed to promote a rescue narrative that foregrounded an outcry against the intertwined deployment of US hard power and complicity of Yemeni ruling elite. The AQAP advanced a simplified response narrative that advocated violence. In February 2014, for example, their media outlet al-Malahim released Rad al-Idwan 3 (Repulsion of Aggression 3), a behind-the-scenes footage of four of the organization's 2013 coordinated attacks against several local military and security compounds, believed to host operation rooms for the US drone program. These were the Second Regional Military Command area in Mukala'a, Hadramout (September 30), the 111 Military Camp in Ahwar, Abyan (October 18), the Defense Ministry Compound

Figure 11.2 "Why did you kill my family" graffiti © Murad Subay.

in Sana'a (December 5), and the General Security building in Khour Maksar, Aden (December 31). The video highlights the impact of US drones on Yemeni civilians and promotes "martyrdom," a rhetorical tool of organized violence in the AQAP's literature, as Yemenis' salvation against the United States and its Yemeni allies.

Unlike the AQAP's one-dimensional critique, the Houthis' critique of the US role in Yemen invested in mobilizing the public to challenge perceived signs of Western hegemony in the country. Even though the movement has eventually failed in unifying the country as a result of short-sighted planning (e.g., 2015 coup) and inability to embrace pluralist politics (leading to civil war backed by Saudi-Iranian contestations), their outcry for sovereignty played an important role in their transformation from a socio-religious entity battling state atrocities into a well-organized political force that disrupted the country's post-2011 transition. The following section examines the Houthis' critique in light of their *sarkha*.

The Articulations of the Houthi *Sarkha*

The rapid disintegration of the 2011 revolutionary momentum in Yemen from concerted attempts to safeguard the political transition toward pluralism into a de facto constitutional declaration by Houthis was wrapped in multiple layers of disorder and violence. At the core of this transformation, Yemeni public anxieties around their country's sovereignty were constantly challenged by top-down interventions from US, UN, and regional power brokers. To codify this public anxiety, Houthi affiliates (fighters and politicians) advanced a rescue narrative that was already developing prior to 2011. This narrative sought to reclaim state agency through embattling the ruling elites, often presented as proxy agents to foreign interests. Key to the Houthis' efforts was their *sarkha*, which served as a recruiting slogan that advocated for a postcolonial grassroots religious militancy by framing the United States along with Israel as part of a Judeo-Christian composite dedicated to undermining Islam and Muslims.

The *sarkha* originated in a lecture titled *As-sarkha fi wajh al-mustakbreen* (A Scream in the Face of the Arrogant), delivered by the Houthi movement's founder Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi in 2002. In this lecture, al-Houthi offered the moral justification for the slogan by informing his followers that Islam and Muslims were "at the center of grave conspiracies woven by America and Israel." He reviewed the impact of the US-led "war on terror" on the lives of Muslims across the globe and inspired the audience to embrace the *sarkha* as a rejection of US hegemony.²⁷ Subsequently, the sensational *sarkha* rose as an empowering slogan for Houthi supporters, prompting more resistance against Saleh's US-backed government. Saleh's government perceived the Houthi slogan not as a demand for sovereignty but as a threatening local manifestation of Iran's increasing influence in the Arab world. The government ignored the root causes of the Houthi movement, that is, years of disenfranchisement, isolation, and disruption to the status quo tribal order in Houthis' stronghold governorate of Saada. The result was six wars against them in the period 2004–10, resulting in the death of the leader and the emergence of his younger brother's

leadership, Abdul-Malik Bedreddin al-Houthi.²⁸ Marieke Brandt, author of one of the most comprehensive works on Houthis, locates these wars within a multilayered local context informed by several elements: post-1962 civil war “shifting internal power balances, the uneven distribution of resources and political participation, the accumulation of mutual grievances, [and] growing sectarianism and tribalisation.”²⁹

The government’s violent approach against Houthis and openness to US violations of Yemen’s skies only solidified the slogan’s tenacity, which received much circulation through the Houthis’ utilization of several communication tools in the country. Since mosques constituted a very critical popular culture site in the Yemeni culture, there were many accounts of Houthi members disrupting mosques in various parts of the country by abruptly shouting the *sarkha*. Houthi supporters were encouraged to yell their *sarkha* out loud from the rooftop of their houses. The message also disseminated through Houthi media outlets such as al-Maseerah (The March) television channel and *Nabth al-Masar* (*Pulse of the Path*) newspaper as well as alternative media tools, for example, internet websites www.ansarullah.com—which was later hacked and suspended—blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Both traditional and alternative media have served the movement organize their literature—lectures, statements, press conferences, poems, religious songs, *zwamil* (tribal chants), writings, and so on. The *sarkha*, in a sense, was a way for people to identify with Houthis but had a far more empowering appeal when screamed as it enabled individuals to personally participate in the rejection of status quo politics.

Although there is no immediate link between the origination of the *sarkha* and the US drone program, the premise of the *sarkha*’s anti-US and Israeli hegemony draws from popular sentiments at the core of Yemeni collective memory, most readily rendered through the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In an interview with Hezbollah’s television network al-Manar, on the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian people (November 29, 2013), the Houthi leader explained his movement’s stance toward Israel and the United States. He criticized the success of imperial powers in disorienting Muslims from the Palestinian cause. This success, he added, was enabled by Arab and Muslim collaborating regimes that subjected media outlets, cultural products, educational curricula, and religious discourses to the service of the West.³⁰ In his response to a question about the Muslims’ responsibility toward the Palestinian issue, al-Houthi reiterated the tenets of the movement’s critique of America. He stressed the possibility of supporting the Palestinian cause through a number of measures that included utilizing media in “intensively spreading awareness” about the cause through feeding the public with slogans that denounce Zionism and America as two powers that have incurred aggression on Palestinians. The slogans, he argued, will “feed hatred” and “grow awareness” and the “feeling of responsibility” toward a firm stand on the issue. Hence, the *sarkha* could be understood in this context to serve as a recruiting instrument that transcends its rhetorical value and promises a uniting purpose for the public to rally around.

In the same interview, al-Houthi continued to argue that slogans could not operate in a vacuum. He called for enacting boycott measures against American and Israeli products. A Houthi supporter, Salah al-Shurqubi, captured the essence of this message, which had been central to the movement’s demands since its inception, in a short clip

titled al-Muqata'a (The Boycott, 2012). The clip starts with a screenshot of a list of American and Israeli brand products. Then, it features a Yemeni pushing a wheelbarrow to the market to buy American products, such as white flour, honey, and Coca-Cola. On his way, he reads a Houthi-endorsed road sign that roughly translates as "Boycott American and Israeli products" but chooses to completely ignore it. The camera moves to project interconnected images of the purchasing process of American brands and the arming of a drone at an American base with hellfire missiles. On his way back home, he stops by the board sign to catch his breath. As he starts drinking a Coca-Cola can, a drone fires the missile, the person falls dead while regretfully pointing at the boycott message. The clip functions within a continuum of Houthi critique that locates consumption of neoliberalism as a sign of complicity and acceptance of US aggressions against Yemenis.

Houthis have circulated fiery sermons, political speeches, and media reports denouncing targeted killing raids that claimed the lives of many civilians and violated Yemen's sovereignty. Their literature shows efforts to debunk US claims of liberty and freedom by showing how drone strikes impact Yemenis in populated areas, markets, refugee camps, and villages. During the GCC-brokered national dialogue process, Houthi representatives abstained from attending meetings involving the US ambassador Gerald Feierstein. In a *Yemen Times* interview with Ali al-Emad, one of the young representatives of the movement in the national dialogue shared the reason:

We think that the US administration doesn't respect Yemenis and is managing everything in Yemen. The US ambassador wanted to hold the lead in the Yemeni scene ... Even his statement regarding military performance and army reorganizing indicates that he controls everything in Yemen.³¹

Al-Emad's assessment of the American ambassador role in Yemen echoes a public anxiety around the US visibility in the political transformation process given its "war on terror" investment in the country.

Al-Emad's rejection of the American ambassador was not because Houthis were necessarily uncompromising in their acceptance of American political interference. The rejection seemed rather mobilized by a sentiment at the time that swept US embassies in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen—to only name Arab Spring revolutionary spaces at the time—when they were swarmed by angry protests, in some cases resulting in acts of vandalism and even violence.³² This was a result of a mixed sense of frustration and anger because of *Innocence of Muslims* (2012), a film that advanced denigrating images of the prophet of Islam along the lines of perversion and sadism.³³ "It seems that inviting the ambassador to the meeting was just to restore him after the American-made film mocking Prophet Mohammed," al-Emad stated. Houthis excelled in cultivating narratives that fed sensational perceptions of the United States in religious terms. The totality of post-9/11 encounters with Muslims in the United States and elsewhere fed a popularized critique of the United States as a neocolonial entity, bent on, what President Bush once called, a "crusade" against a conflated conception of Islam and terrorism. Using religious diction in describing the US "war on terror" was

key in resurrecting a trauma in Islamic collective memory of Western “Christian” aggressions. The religious content of the Houthi *sarkha* became especially potent in such a context.

The charged nature of the *sarkha*, the Houthi leadership insisted, was merely rhetorical as no imminent threats were ever directed against the US presence in the country. In a response to a question whether the United States considered Houthis as an enemy, US ambassador Gerald Feierstein himself affirmed that they only want to “appear as ... being hostile to the United States” and that United States was “never against” them; “we never agreed that they support terrorism,” he added.³⁴ The Houthi slogan, for instance, was spotted nowhere around the US embassy on September 17, 2008, when militants disguised as soldiers detonated two car bombs during the Holy month of Ramadan, leading to the death of sixteen and injury of six Yemenis; an unknown Islamic Jihad group claimed responsibility.³⁵ Signs of the Houthi *sarkha* were not also traced on September 11, 2012, when hundreds of protestors clashed with US embassy security forces, smashed windows, burned cars, and broke through the main gate. The political instability in Sana’a formed a critical factor in producing a less-friendly environment for local law enforcement forces to intervene at the time. The attacks transcended grievances against the *Innocence of Muslims* film and offered the opportunity for extreme reaction based on growing grievances against the US “war on terror” conduct.³⁶ The attacks marked not only the eleventh anniversary of the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001, but also served as a manifestation of the US “war on terror” tactics in the Arab and Muslim worlds. They constituted a post-Arab Spring critical moment that called for a serious interrogation of the politics surrounding Arabs’ and Muslims’ anti-US grievances.

Despite the *sarkha*’s semantic calls for violence as a means to realize the movement’s message, Houthis opted to utilize its sentimental value to rally the public around their social, political, and even religious directives. During the three-month negotiations in Kuwait between the Yemeni parties of the conflict in 2016, according to an *Al-Quds al-Arabi* report, Houthi representatives issued “a sincere apology” for the slogan during a meeting with the US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Shannon. The apology justified that the *sarkha* was for “domestic consumption as a means to attract support in the streets and create a common cause between their supporters to keep them united.”³⁷ Critiquing the United States has its own mobilizing currency that Houthis have managed to utilize effectively. In his critique of the US role in promoting democracy in Yemen, al-Emad delivered a message that carried a sense of skepticism and anger that reverberated across the Yemeni society and offered domestic sense to the slogan’s circulation:

Each one has to obtain an attitude toward any colonial country that doesn’t want stability in his country. We know that the US pays lip service to democracy, but they are against it and against stability in the country. It is known that the US brought great problems to all countries it set foot in. Explosions and violence in any country coincides with the presence of Americans. Therefore, what is said is only the opposite of what is done.³⁸

The chief editor of the Houthi newspaper *Nabth al-Masar*, Osama Sari, published a series of reports that capitalized on this sentiment and questioned the role of US marines in Yemen. In a report titled “al-Marines al-Amreeki and al-laiyali al-hamra’a” (American Marines and Romantic Nights), he published photos and names of US marines dancing with Yemeni women and state officials in one of the halls of Sheraton hotel—the primary residence of US embassy personnel in Sana’a at the time. Sari contextualized the photos in a cultural framework that contrasted American and Yemeni social, cultural, and moral codes and values. He explained:

The danger of American military presence in Yemen lies in its degenerate and imperial nature that does not offer compassion and mercy in treating women, men, children, and elderly. Its violations target Yemeni family honor. They are people without values, morals, or principles. The Americans came to Yemen to implement one project filled with hatred towards every Arab and Muslim. They cannot be friends, and they do not wish us goodness and prosperity. The information we have about how the marines rape our women and disrespect our families is but a microcosm of a future of more rape and assault on our honor. This will continue unless all Yemenis wake up and angrily scream in the face of everyone who allowed for our land, honor, and dignity to be desecrated.³⁹

Sari later accused the US embassy of threatening his life as a result of his reporting, but there was no substantial evidence. The coverage was sensational and polarizing in its depiction of the US embassy as a sponsor of both Yemeni moral degeneration and the AQAP. This propagandist antagonism to the US presence in Yemen may not necessarily have reflected a Houthi institutionalized interest in driving Americans out of the country, but it certainly touched on one of Yemenis’ primary demands, that is, integrity and self-control.

Albeit to a limited degree, Houthis capitalized on Yemenis’ rising outrage against the US paradoxical policy in Yemen, that is, promoting peaceful transition of power while conducting targeted killings. Perhaps, the most outstanding example of the public outrage that showcased the Houthis’ politicization efforts could be traced in the massive rally organized on May 24, 2013, less than four months before the Houthis’ armed control of the capital (Figure 11.3). The rally was a reaction to a reported increase in Marines presence in Yemen at the time. Organized under the slogan “No for Government that Grants Entry to American Marines,” the rally crossed many streets in the Yemeni capital raising banners that codified their rejection of US hard power: “No for violating sovereignty,” “Yemeni military cannot remain silent,” “American marines are danger to Yemen and its people,” “Down with a regime granting entry to American marines,” “May eyes turn blind that witness Marines invasion of Yemeni homes and do nothing,” and “A government granting entry to American Marines does not represent the people and their will.” The marchers chanted slogans like “you arrogant American, my country is not for imperialists,” “Oh! American, get out,” and “You invader, get out.” The rally echoed the Houthis’ political investment in rallying the public through rhetorical appeals for sovereignty and critiques of US hegemony.

Figure 11.3 “No to a Government that Grants Entry to American Marines” Rally, May 24, 2013.

Conclusion

The *sarkha* has been described as a “nihilistic slogan” because of its message of violence, division, disorder, and chaos.⁴⁰ In pursuit of empowerment in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 Yemeni revolution, Houthis advanced a twofold policy. They engaged in the political process by contributing to national reconciliation efforts while nurturing power on the ground that resulted in their initial control of their stronghold governorate Sa’ada along with parts of neighboring governorates, for example, Haja (access to the Red Sea), al-Jawf (promising oil reserve), and ‘Amran (bordering the capital), before launching their nation-wide mission that laid the foundations for the contemporary turmoil. The solidification of their power eventually sidelined

political reconciliation attempts in favor of claiming total control of the country in an increasingly sectarian-based polarizing environment. This process transformed the movement from a weak entity embattling the state into an organized force with well-structured public relations outlets addressing cultural and political issues at the local, regional, and global scales.

At the core of Houthis' rise to power has been their ability to present an interplaying critique of the US hegemony in the region (supporting Israel, invasion of Iraq, drone warfare, etc.) and of the complicity of its allied regimes (e.g., Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Hadi government). Alongside this process, the *sarkha* preserved the group's autonomy but did not gain Yemenis' full support for two main reasons. First, its message is both polarizing and sectarian. Second, Houthis have developed a pattern of declaring the *sarkha* in the immediate aftermath of winning local wars or destroying houses, leading fellow Yemenis to associate it with the Houthis' organized violence in the country. The *sarkha*, even though it helped Houthis with their immediate recruiting objectives, has eventually lost its desired effects as it now remains an identity marker of a particular sociopolitical and religious community in northern Yemen vying for power at the cost of the country's own instability, and ironically, sovereignty. The civil war conditions have certainly prescribed the failure of the *sarkha* in rallying Yemeni social and cultural politics behind its resistance implications.

Notes

- 1 Interview with Mohammed Nasser al-Jarraah, Silat al-Jarraah village (May 31, 2013); as quoted in Singh, "Death by Drone," 75.
- 2 Blumi, *Destroying Yemen*, 2.
- 3 The coalition comprises the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) except Oman. Other Arab countries were Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Sudan. In 2017, Qatar left the coalition. In 2019, Morocco suspended its participation.
- 4 The Qutbian conception of religious struggle is spelled out in Qutb's multivolume interpretation of the Qur'an in *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*. Also see Qutb's critique of the United States in "The America I Have Seen" (1951).
- 5 See Berman, "The Philosopher of Islamic Terror;" also, Wright, *The Looming Tower*.
- 6 LeVine and Reynolds, "Theater of Immediacy," 62.
- 7 Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, 54.
- 8 "CIA 'killed al-Qaeda suspects' in Yemen," *BBC*.
- 9 Entous, "US Acknowledges Its Drone Strikes."
- 10 Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet."
- 11 See Benjamin, *Drone Warfare*; Scahill, *Dirty Wars*; Varisco, "Drone Strikes in the War on Terror"; and Singh, "Death by Drone."
- 12 Scherr, "US Counterterrorism Strikes."
- 13 Shane's "Drone Strikes Statistics Answer Few Questions, and Raise Many."
- 14 Watson, "Trump Nixes Public Report on Civilians Killed by Drone Strikes."
- 15 Al-Muslimi, "Testimony at Drone Wars Senate Committee Hearing."
- 16 Benson's "US Role in Yemen Covered Up by Its President, WikiLeaks File Reveals."
- 17 "Obama's Speech on Drone Policy," *New York Times*.

- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Shane, "Yemen's Leader, President Hadi, Praises US Drone Strikes."
- 20 "Yemeni Parliament in Non-Binding Vote against Drone Attacks," *Reuters*.
- 21 As reported by the Yemeni state news agency SABA; see "Yemeni Parliament in Non-Binding Vote against Drone Attacks," *Reuters*.
- 22 Interview with Moqbel Abdullah Ali al-Jarraah, Silat al-Jarraah village (May 31, 2013); as quoted in Singh, "Death by Drone," 96.
- 23 "A Wedding that Became a Funeral" *Human Rights Watch*.
- 24 Al-Muslimi, "Testimony at Drone Wars Senate Committee Hearing."
- 25 Mwatana Organization for Human Rights: <http://mwatana.org>.
- 26 To learn about Murad Subay's graffiti campaigns, visit <https://muradsubay.com/campaigns/12-hours>.
- 27 Al-Houthi, "As-sarkha fi wajah al-mustakbreen."
- 28 Six wars: (June–September 2004), (March–May 2005), (November 2005–early 2006), (January–June 2007), (March–July 2008), and (August 2009–February 2010).
- 29 Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 2.
- 30 "An Interview with Abdul-Malik Bedreddin al-Houthi," *Manar TV*.
- 31 Al-Samei, "Houthi Leader Ali Al-Emad to the Yemen Times."
- 32 The Benghazi attacks in Libya were the most notorious, claiming the lives of American ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and Foreign Service officer Sean Smith, and sparking the Benghazi controversy in Washington, DC.
- 33 The film was written and produced by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula. Short trailers were released in YouTube two months prior to the embassy attacks.
- 34 "Asharq al-Awsat Interview: US Envoy to Yemen Gerald M. Feierstein," *Asharq Al-Awsat*.
- 35 Worth, "10 Are Killed in Bombings at Embassy in Yemen."
- 36 Ghobari, Mohammed. "Yemeni Protesters Storm US Embassy Compound in Sanaa."
- 37 El-Bar, "Houthis Apologise to US over Use of 'Death to America' Slogan."
- 38 Al-Samei, "Houthi Leader Ali Al-Emad to the Yemen Times."
- 39 Sari, "Al-Marines Yahtafil bi Ihtilal al-Yemen."
- 40 Al-Daghshi, *Al-Huthyoun wa mustaqbalhum al-askari wa al-siyasi wa al-tarbawi*, 163–71.

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