

# “Dancing on the heads of snakes”<sup>1</sup>: The emergence of the Houthi movement and the role of securitizing subjectivity in Yemen’s civil war

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## Abstract

On March 25, 2015 a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen to force the Houthis (*Ansar Allah* or the *Party of God*) to withdraw from Sana’a and enable President Hadi to return to Yemen. Despite vast research on the structural causes of the Arab Uprisings in general, and on the Yemeni Spring in particular, the roles and implications of *ontologically (in)secure communities* in intra-state conflicts have not yet been sufficiently explored. This study examines the various exogenous and endogenous factors that led to the emergence of the Believing Youth (*Shabab al-Moumineen*) movement in the first place, and then the Houthi movement by applying Catherina Kinnvall’s “identity-signifier” and “securitizing subjectivity” analytical framework. The purpose here is to shed light on how the Houthis’ collective identity construction and their capability to adapt enabled them to substantially influence Yemeni domestic politics in the post-Arab Spring era.

**Keywords:** ontological (in)security, collective identity formation, mobilization, Yemen, Houthi movement

## Introduction

On October 8, 2016 the Saudi Arabian-led international coalition bombed a funeral in the capital of Yemen, killing at least 140 and injuring over 500 people.<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing,

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<sup>1</sup> Former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh once likened the challenges posed by keeping Yemen united to “dancing on the heads of snakes”. The 2010 book with the similar title written by Victoria Clark offers a comprehensive historical overview of the internal balance of power in the Arab world’s poorest country.

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<sup>3</sup> BBC News: *Yemen conflict: Saudis blame funeral hall bombing on mistake*, 15 October 2016

the war is still ongoing between the Houthi rebels and the coalition forces. Yemen, the Arab world's most impoverished nation is inhabited by 25.6 million people. According to the latest estimations (at the time of writing this), the current civil war thus far killed at least 10,000 people and 21.2 million people are in dire need of humanitarian assistance (Sharp, 2016). In fact, the military balance remains largely unchanged, while the conflict is getting more devastating due to infrastructural damage, the lack of access to sanitation and the outbreak of cholera. Furthermore, the UN is not succeeding in securing a ceasefire and renewed peace talks between the belligerents. The final outcome of the current Yemeni crisis is difficult to predict, but it is safe to assume that any viable compromise will entail a political voice for the Houthis.

Who are the Houthis and how could they evolve to the de facto leaders of Yemen in such a short period? In popular western media, the current conflict is most frequently described as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran and one of the most severe fronts in the so-called "Middle Eastern Cold War." According to this framework Tehran provides extensive financial, ideological and material support for the Shiite Houthis in order to further expand its regional influence at the cost of the Sunni powerhouse, Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> Riyadh's main concern is that the Iranian support for the Houthi fighters will result in a Hezbollah-like geopolitical threat on its southwestern border.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Kingdom is also afraid of a possible Houthi-inspired Shiite uprising within its own borders.

The present study seeks to challenge these often reductionist approaches by analyzing the Houthi movement through the analytical lens of *ontological security*. Despite vast research on the structural causes of the Arab Spring in general, and on the Yemeni case in particular, the roles and implications of *ontologically (in)secure communities* in intra-state conflicts have not yet been sufficiently explored. The Middle-East deserves another approach from International Relations scholars. The region is characterized by overlapping loyalties in which the national, regional and international levels of analysis cannot be separated.<sup>6</sup> By focusing on the role of collective identity

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance: The Atlantic: *Yemen's Wily Puppet Master*, 2015.03.

<sup>5</sup> The exact degree of Tehran's involvement in Yemeni affairs and its support of the Houthis is a subject of much debate. Saudi Arabia's involvement in its underdeveloped neighbor's domestic politics is, however, far from being a new phenomenon.

<sup>6</sup> If one examines Yemen's history and regional power brokers shifting interests there, this feature becomes apparent. For instance, former president Saleh quickly realized that while playing out against each other various tribes might ensure his domestic political domination for a certain period, his legitimacy needed to be supplemented and cemented by regional backing as well. Alliance formation and its dynamics are

formation in times of structural changes, it becomes possible to gain a deeper understanding of societal changes and their medium and long-term security-related implications. A comparative study which simultaneously takes into account the ontological-security-seeking behavior of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the southern secessionist movement, the Yemeni transitional government and the Houthi rebels would be welcomed.

It is important to clarify that this study does not claim to present a comprehensive survey of the often more complex patterns of Yemeni domestic politics. Still, precisely assessing the Houthi rebels' evolution remains crucial in understanding the wider implications of the multidimensional security challenges Yemen faces, including inter-tribal conflicts, sectarianism, northern insurgency, southern succession movement and the presence of a strong al-Qaida franchise in the southern and eastern provinces (Clive, 2011: 903).

### **Theoretical background: Ontological security and collective identity formation**

The first step in order to understand the rise of the Houthis is to open up the so-called "black box" of states, which International Relations and particularly its classical and neorealist approaches have long excluded from their analysis. Ontological security, or "security as being" is originally an individual-level concept developed by R.D. Laing (1969) and Anthony Giddens (1991). According to the original sociological theory, individuals have a certain level of basic trust about their surrounding environment, thus they are able to assess the consequences of their actions, and by establishing routines they can cope with uncertainties. This predictability in the day-to-day activities<sup>7</sup> provides actors with a stable identity and ensures existential certainty, or in other words ontological security. Ontological insecurity on the other hand means that in times of rapid or fundamental changes individuals are not certain any more as to how to relate means to ends – thereby they will be overwhelmed by anxieties and their identity becomes unstable. In order to overcome this challenge, individuals develop various balancing strategies such as formulating a new identity, or returning to a previously established one, even if it is harmful in the long run, in order to gain back ontological security.

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therefore substantially different in this region from the classical neorealist model developed by Stephen Walt.

<sup>7</sup> Predictability rests on routines. Routines therefore are the fundamental actions that anchor identity. For a more detailed overview of the relevance of routines in the security dilemma, see: Mitzen 2004, 2006a, 2006b

Recently, a growing body of literature emerged in the field of International Relations, where scholars scaled up the theory to the level of communities (Kinnvall, 2004) and the state level (Mitzen, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Steele, 2008b, etc.) in order to reinterpret conflict and peace dynamics by including various non-material factors. The theory of ontological security provides a productive lens for examining the complicated nexus between security and identity<sup>8</sup>, therefore it is different from the classical IR understanding of “security as survival”. The underlying argument of these theories is that all political actors face the need to maintain a sense of biographical continuity in order to realize a sense of agency. Moreover, this sense of agency has to be “recognized in and through actors’ relations with others” (Kinnvall, Mitzen, 2016:2). As such reciprocity is a crucial variable during identity construction and maintenance. Certain scholars<sup>9</sup> argue, however, that contemporary IR literature reduces ontological security to matters of identity preservation. The present paper agrees with Browning and Joenniemi, who claims that ontological security is as much about stability as about adaptability.<sup>10</sup> As we will see later, one of the most important elements of the Houthi movement’s success is their relatively high degree of adaptation in this respect, especially when we compare them to other, politically less successful actors, such as the southern secessionist movement.

Catherina Kinnvall (2004) argues that globalization made individuals and groups more ontologically insecure. Evidentially, not just globalization, but such structural changes as the Arab Spring can also give rise to existential uncertainty. During these tumultuous and transitional periods individuals seek to draw closer to any collective that is perceived as reducing existential anxiety, in order to reaffirm their self-identity. The feeling of “belonging” helps actors to rebuild their ontological security. Kinnvall argues further that “as individuals’ ontological security increases, they attempt to securitize subjectivity, which means an intensified search for one stable identity (regardless of its actual existence)” (Kinnvall, 2004:749). It is relevant to emphasize that the subjectivity-securitizing process always involves a “stranger-Other” differentiation. As we will see later, identifying the “Other”, who can be also turned into an enemy, is a crucial factor in times of identity construction and reformulation. In order to fully grasp the subjectivity-

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<sup>8</sup> For an earlier discussion on state identity and ontological security, see: Wendt (1994,1999), Huysmans (1998) and McSweeney (1999)

<sup>9</sup> See: Browning, Joenniemi 2016

<sup>10</sup> Adaptability here is defined as “openness towards and the ability to cope with change.” (Browning, Joenniemi 2016: 2)

securitizing process, the concepts of chosen traumas and chosen glories also need to be introduced. They are “the means through which subjectivity becomes securitized in relation to others” and these events “provide the linking objects for later generations to be rediscovered, reinterpreted, and reused” (Kinnvall, 2004:751).

Kinnvall’s main observation is that nationalism and religion are both intimately linked to chosen traumas and chosen glories. They are “powerful identity-signifiers in times of uncertain structural conditions, with the implication that they are likely to become more persuasive rallying points than other identity-signifiers” (Kinnvall 2004:757). The strength of nationalism and religion as powerful identity-signifiers lies in their ability “to convey unity, security, and inclusiveness in times of crisis” (Kinnvall 2004: 762). As we will see, the Houthis managed to utilize both of these factors to achieve their political goals.

### **The Houthi’s identity roots: Zaydism and the emergence of the Believing Youth movement**

The Houthis can be categorized in multiple ways. They can be viewed as a grassroots political movement, a non-state actor aided by various external powers, a distinct religious minority, or even as an organized militia. In fact, the movement can assert all of these roles at the same time. In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the Houthis, we must acknowledge that these identities are not mutually exclusive, but exist simultaneously – often reinforcing each other. It is also relevant to emphasize that identity is not a constant state of being, but a continuous process of becoming.<sup>11</sup>

Yemen is characterized by a unique dual-governance structure. Historically, the central government possessed only a limited degree of control over the country’s peripheral provinces. Water scarcity, the lack of employment opportunities and harsh weather conditions are all factors that contributed to the semi-autonomous nature of the northern region. Here, the dominant social value system is the *qabyala* (tribalism), in which tribal networks and family relations dominate political and social linkages. In practice, tribal confederations<sup>12</sup> and their powerful leaders are responsible for providing conflict mediation, public services and other basic state functions. Therefore, the local population’s loyalty is based on these socio-cultural microstructures rather than Western-

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of “change” is at the heart of identity construction. In sum, we should not forget that collective identity is more “than the sum of the individuals involved” (Kinnvall 2004: 748).

<sup>12</sup> The Hashid and Baku confederations are still the most influential tribal networks in Yemen.

type state sovereignty. In short, territory and power is organized quite differently from the Westphalian state model. It is indeed a crucial variable, when one seeks to understand how an originally religious movement was able to extend its influence and agenda in a relatively short period.

Originally, the Houthi movement is a Zaydi Shiite group from the northern, Sa'ada region of Yemen. Currently, Zaydis make up 35 to 45 per cent of Yemen's total population.<sup>13</sup> It is important to clarify that although Zaydi Shi'ism (or the so-called "Fivers") is a sub-sect of Shiite Islam, it is doctrinally different from the dominant "Twelver Shiism" which is practiced in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. In fact, Zaydi religious practices are closer to Sunni Islam. Zaydis take their name from their fifth *Imam* (ruler of the community), Zayd ibn Ali. In 740, Zayd revolted against the Umayyad Caliphate because of its corrupt and unjust leadership. This revolution remains the core reference point of the Zaydis, who believe that their imam has to be both a descendent of Ali and one who makes it his religious duty to oppose and fight against unjust and corrupt political rulers (King, 2012). The principle of opposition against corruption is one of the core features of the Houthis' identity and an integral part of their self-narrative. The Zaydi political institution, the Zaydi Imamate, which merged tribal and religious law, emerged in northern Yemen in 893 and lasted for more than a thousand years, until the 1962 revolution. Then Egyptian-supported Yemeni army officers overthrew the last imam, Muhammad al-Badr, and subsequently established the Yemeni Arab Republic (YAR), which in practice ended the tribal autonomy of northern Yemen. These socio-political changes made a lasting impact on the decade-long transformation, and eventual radicalization of the Zaydi minority. The end of the Imamate can be categorized as the first chosen trauma for the Zaydi community, since the previously stable identity of the group, i.e.: they were the effective decision-makers and rulers, was challenged. This fundamental structural change demanded the first round of adaptation from the Zaydis.

The post-Imamate era was characterized by the increasing marginalization of the Zaydi sect, the gradually increasing Wahhabi infiltration<sup>14</sup> supported by Saudi Arabia into

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<sup>13</sup> CIA World Factbook: Middle East, Yemen country profile

<sup>14</sup> "Wahhabi ideology was developed by Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi'i in the early 1980s around the Dar al-Hadith institute in the small town of Dammaj in Sa'da Province. Theoretically, the main features of the apolitical version of Salafism include a claim of loyalty to the political ruler (Amir, king or president) even when that ruler is corrupt and unjust, as well as a will to transcend local and national contexts by delivering a universal message based exclusively on the Qur'an and the hadith. The Yemeni Salafists aim to preserve Muslims from strife by not engaging in politics, nor participating in elections, demonstrations, or revolutions." (Bonney: 2010)

the Zaydi tribal heartlands and the subsequent conversion of many Zaydis to Wahhabism. (King 2012: 406). From the 1980s, Wahabbism rapidly gained support in the originally Zaydi territories due to its extensive “marketing strategies”, such as the establishment of religious institutions, educational centers and massive social benefit systems. Riyadh’s aim was to gradually transform the socio-cultural and religious landscape of northern Yemen and to alter the balance of power to Riyadh’s favor. In terms of ontological security, the Wahhabi infiltration was an externally supported identity-challenger which caused further existential anxiety within the Zaydi community.

In this context religion, as an identity-signifier, played a central role in the Houthis’ identity construction, simply because the movement’s original members were dominantly coming from the Zaydi sect. By the demise of the Imamate, the Houthis found their first “Other,” as they were able to securitize subjectivity in opposition to the Salafists. This first identity construction phase was centered around the al-Houthi family and on the domestic political level it manifested in the al-Haqq (party of Truth/Justice) party, and later on in the Believing Youth Movement (Shabab al-Moumineen). The al-Haqq party was formed by the al-Houthi and other families as a competitor against the Salafist-supported Islah party. After the 1994 civil war, Hussein al-Houthi fled to Syria and after returning to Sa’da he left al-Haqq and established the Believing Youth movement, which embraced a more radical version of Zaydism, so-called Zaydi revivalism, and supplemented it with a harsh anti-imperialist rhetoric.<sup>15</sup> The Believing Youth started as a network of educational centers for the marginalized northern Yemeni youth. When they began to open their summer camps to gradually regain their local influence, it meant that they simultaneously began to politicize the Zaydi cause (Freeman 2009: 1008), which had long-term consequences regarding the identity transformation process.

### **From politicization to securitization: The Believing Youth and the Houthi movements**

Yemen became a unified country<sup>16</sup> in 1990 and it meant that new political opportunities were on the rise for the younger generation of Zaydis. Ali Abdullah Saleh, the powerful

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<sup>15</sup> Day W., Stephen (2012): *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen A Troubled National Union*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 215-216.

<sup>16</sup> Before unification Yemen consisted of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the north and the southern People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).

Zaydi tribesman from the Hashid tribal confederation became the first president of the newly unified Yemen.<sup>17</sup> Saleh was able to maintain a delicate balance of power during his three-decades-long tenure as he mastered divide-and-rule tactics.<sup>18</sup> Saleh's extensive support of the Global War on Terror after 9/11, and the subsequent invasion of Iraq, marked a new era for the al-Houthi, who started to raise opposition against the Sa'ana–Washington alliance, which he viewed as the hotbed of corruption and the sellout of Yemen's sovereignty.

Later on, Hussein al-Houthi advised his followers to stop paying *zakat* to the state, and instead give it to the Houthis. (Day, 2012: 216). From 2002 onwards, he started to utilize Hezbollah's notorious "Allahu akbar, death to America, death to Israel, curse upon the Jews, victory to Islam" slogan to express his opposition. Religious gatherings rapidly attracted authorities' attention and they began to consider al Houthi's political activism as an internal threat to state security (Salmoni et al. 2010:7). In other words, the Saleh regime began to securitize<sup>19</sup> the Houhti-led activism which meant that extraordinary measures were legitimized against the movement. During this stage, the Houhtis did not fight any more against their first "Other," the Wahhabis – the new "Other" became Saleh and his governing party, the General People's Congress (GPC). In 2004, after a failed attempt by Saleh to find a political compromise with al-Houthi, the government began its military attack against the Houthis in their mountainous stronghold with the aim of killing the movement's leader. Between 2004 and 2010, in the course of six violent rounds of conflict (the so-called Sa'ada wars) the Houthis became irreversibly radicalized (Wells et al. 2010: 168-178). After the death of al-Houthi, his father and later his younger brother, Abdu al-Malik took charge of the group. The former leader was "martyred" and the intra-state war, and this further legitimized the Houthi's cause in the eyes of the population. In 2007, Qatari representatives intervened and offered to broker a peace deal which demanded ceasefire and compliance with the Yemeni republican political system.

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<sup>17</sup> It is also crucial to emphasize that despite his authoritarian tendencies, Saleh was unable to govern the country single-handedly due to the country's complex tribal and regional settings. He relied heavily on a special cooperation agreement with leading tribal and military figures, most notably with Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the head of the Hashid Tribal Confederation, and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the most powerful military commander of the country.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Brehony (2015): "Saleh was skilled at divide and rule. In the 1980s and early 1990s he encouraged Sunni and tribal Islamic militias to counter the influence of Marxists. When these became too powerful in the 1990s he appeared to allow the Believing Youth, which later became the Houthi movement, political space to develop" (Brehony 2015:234).

<sup>19</sup> The present paper applies the following definition of securitization, with a view to its specific context: "The construction of identities on the basis of the negative difference provided by radical otherness and enmity" (Browning and Joenniemi 2016: 2).



However, this attempt was only a short-lived initiative. The war ended with the heavy-handed involvement of the Saudi Air Force in November 2009.<sup>20</sup> The Sa'ada wars inevitably transformed the Houthi movement from a student organization to a popular resistance movement. From the Houthis ontological security perspective, the Sa'ada wars can be described as their first "chosen glories." Despite the protracted nature of the conflict and the high level of casualties, the simple fact that the Houthis could not be defeated by government forces alone, only by the intervention of Yemen's much larger and military capable neighbor Saudi Arabia, was enough for the movement to portray the military struggle as a success.

### **From the Yemeni Spring to Operation Decisive Strom**

The latest milestone in the Houthis' identity transformation took place during the region-wide Arab uprisings in 2011. The Houthis gained real political momentum, as the 33-year-long autocratic rule of Saleh ended.<sup>21</sup> The Yemeni Spring was a peculiar case of the Arab Spring, because the political transition was externally negotiated by the Gulf Cooperation Council. The post-Saleh era meant to alter the *status quo ante* and to develop sufficient political representation of the previously marginalized groups.

The mere fact that Saleh's rule ended can be considered as a fundamental change. It brought a security and political vacuum in which previously stable identities and roles were challenged. This window of opportunity was most successfully utilized by the Houthis who were able to portray themselves as principal defenders of the entire Yemeni society. After months of protracted protests and negotiations, Saleh had to resign in exchange for immunity for him and his relatives. Additionally, he was allowed to remain in the country and to continue to be the first man of his party, the GPC (General People's Congress). The ultimate goal of the deal was to place former Vice President Hadi in power, who won the 2012 elections with more than 99 per cent of votes (as the only candidate).

As Saleh could remain in the country, he was able to utilize his extensive patronage network to sabotage the transition and eventually support the Houthis' advance.

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<sup>20</sup> During these six years an estimated 150,000 people were displaced, and thousands died in the conflict (Salmoni, Loidolt, Wells 2010:10).

<sup>21</sup> In the wake of the uprising, AQAP-associated militias capitalized on the emerging security vacuum and seized territory in the southern part of Yemen. Soon after this, the United Nations, Saudi Arabia and other members of the international community brokered a political compromise in order to halt the region-wide escalation of the conflict.

Policy-planning failures, such as the lack of inclusivity made the GCC initiative a failure in the long-run. The main shortcoming of the deal was that it marginalized those actors who initiated the Yemeni Spring.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout 2013, with the support of the international community, the new political establishment initiated the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) which was aimed at reaching national consensus on a new political system for Yemen. The most important recommendation of the NDC was to reform the federal structure of Yemen by establishing six regions instead of twenty-six. This proposal however was rejected by both the Houthis and the southern secessionist movement.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, one of the nine major issues that was addressed at the NDC was how to alleviate the grievances of the Houthis. This explicitly meant that the Houthi movement was acknowledged as a political force in the Yemeni political arena. The core problem however remained in place, i.e. in practice the Houthis were excluded from the Hadi-led transitional government.

They could thus claim that the newly-elected government is just the continuation of the Saleh administration, incompetent and paralyzed by internal divisions. Subsequently, in 2014, when the government wanted to remove fuel subsidies, as part of its economic reforms, the Houthis called for mass protest and launched a military offensive against the various tribal allies of President Hadi.

In September, different pro-Saleh forces joined their resistance and together they were able to take over the capital. This move meant that the Houthis were able to considerably expand their area of control from their traditional northern stronghold. Moreover, as dissatisfaction with the Hadi government constantly grew, the Houthis were able to recruit new members at this time not only from among Shiites, but from among Sunnis also (Wells et.al, 2010). This broadened, and eventually more heterogeneous, membership meant that the Houthis had to shift their self-narrative from religion towards nationalism as a rallying point. The Houthis successfully popularized their cause. They were able to capitalize on the widespread resentment against the transitional government, and they were able to utilize Saleh's support.

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<sup>22</sup> The protestors were led by students under the name of the "Union of Movement for Independent Youth".

<sup>23</sup> "The Houthi rejection of the six-federation plan was mostly because their Sa'ada governorate was included in the proposed Azal region, which included Amran, Sana'a and Dhamar (all were under Houthi control by the end of 2014) but did not provide them with access to the sea or to a share of Yemen's oil and gas resources" (Brehony 2015: 243).

Regarding their capability to adapt this is noteworthy: the Houthis were thus able to establish an effective working relationship with their former adversary, i.e. Saleh. The Houthi–Saleh alliance began as mere coordination between the two parties, but in the wake of the Saudi-led intervention, it evolved into an effective, formal political cooperation. This alliance is clearly beneficial for the Houthis, who continuously take advantage of Saleh’s extensive patronage network and political influence.<sup>24</sup> From the Houthis’ perspective, however, this shift means that they managed to build up a pragmatic political agenda and they regard Saleh as an important actor who can considerably contribute to their power aspirations.<sup>25</sup>

In 2014, the Houthis became the *de facto* leaders of Sana’a and they made significant territorial gains. In September 21, 2014, a new UN-supported “unity government” was appointed which included the Houthis, the Hiraq movement, and the 2011 youth activists, but it was already too late. Instead of the full implementation of the Peace and National Partnership agreement, neither the Houthis, nor Hadi complied. Events then rapidly escalated. In January 2015, the Houthis placed president Hadi under house arrest. Later, he escaped to the port city of Aden and then to Riyadh, where he established a government in exile. Subsequently, the Houthis dissolved the parliament and established the Supreme Revolutionary Committee, as an interim authority which remained unrecognized by the international community.

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan and Senegal<sup>26</sup> launched a military operation in Yemen against the Houthi movement to restore the rule of the internationally recognized president and to reclaim the Houthi-occupied territories.<sup>27</sup> The Saudi-led nine-member coalition retook the port city of Aden and the mostly Sunni-inhabited southern areas of Yemen. However, in spite of the massive air strikes, the maritime blockade and the

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<sup>24</sup> Temporal alliance formation with the Houthis is not a new phenomenon in Saleh’s political repertoire either. Some believe that even during the six rounds of the Sada’a wars Saleh sought to prolong the war in order to get rid of his military commander Ali Mohsen and pave the way for his, son Ahmed (Addin citing Wells, 2016: 4).

<sup>25</sup> Beside psychological aspects, it is crucial to highlight that from a military tactical point of view the mountainous terrain in Yemen is familiar to the Zaydi tribesmen. Government forces relied on artillery and airpower. This knowledge enabled the movement to expand its *modus operandi* from small-scale guerilla attacks effective in the mountainous terrain, to urban terrorism – and to thus strengthen their offensive capabilities (Freeman 2009: 1013).

<sup>26</sup> Oman is the only GCC country not to have taken part in the attack on Yemen. On the background of this decision, see: Middle East Institute: *Oman’s Balancing Act in the Yemen Conflict*, Roby Barrett, Jun 17, 2015

<sup>27</sup> The coalition’s intervention was legitimized by the official request of President Hadi.

coalition support for local Yemeni opposition groups, the Houthis managed to consolidate their territorial gains.<sup>28</sup>

In early August 2016, the Supreme Revolutionary Committee handed power to the Supreme Political Council. This body is the result of the official alliance between the Houthis and Saleh. As such, with the help of Saleh, the Houthis were able to secure a strategic bargaining position. The Houthi–Saleh alliance is an opportunistic cooperation which could have been realized because of the convergence of the parties’ interests, i.e., they strongly oppose the Sunni Islah party, the Ahmar family, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and the transitional government (Addin, 2016).

The deployment of ground forces, which is an option still on the table, would have region-wide repercussions. Saudi Arabia might experience harsh drawbacks, as the Yemeni population already regards the military intervention as a serious attack against national sovereignty. As a response, more and more locals tend to gravitate towards the Houthis. The Yemen peace talks, organized in Kuwait in 2016, revealed that the Houthis are now recognized as a political and military force not just on the domestic Yemeni, but on the international level as well.

## **Conclusion**

After more than a year of military conflict, no side is getting closer to either a political solution or a decisive military victory. Hardly any observer had anticipated that what first was a localized religious group, with a narrow constituency among the youth in the north, would eventually become an organized insurgency, and later a *de facto* power-broker in Yemen.

As noted above, the Houthis successfully politicized and then securitized their cause. They were able to do that through various collective identity construction techniques during times of decisive, structural political changes.

It is also worth to note that Yemen’s multipolar and fragmented political landscape is nothing new. The lack of “Yemeni” identity and the often malfunctioning central government enabled local tribal leaders and various powerful groups to maintain a political order based on customary law in several provinces. The simultaneous radicalization and polarization of the country however is a relatively new development.

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<sup>28</sup> Many of the airstrikes have been unlawful, where the coalition bombed residential neighborhoods, markets and educational facilities, thereby further worsening the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

These changes opened a new window of opportunity for the Houthis, who were able to capitalize on the emerging and gradually widening security vacuum.

The present paper's primary interest was to identify those structural variables that were responsible for the transformation of the Houthi movement from a cultural religious movement to a political-military force. It argued that the relatively high degree of adaptation to changing circumstances and the successful utilization of (first) religion and (later) nationalism as rallying points substantially contributed to the Houthis advancement. By taking into account other, non-material factors during an intra-state conflict, it is thus possible to discover that "security as survival" is more than just ensuring a military victory. "Security as being" can also have decisive impact on achieving the long-term political goals.

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