



AL-HOUTHY MOVEMENT IN YEMEN (2004-2010)

BY

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for the degree of Master of Human Sciences  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the external and internal factors and interactions that led to the emergence of the al-Houthi movement such as State's policies of anti-Zaydism and the spread of Wahabbism in Sa'adah province. These factors led to a series of disputes into Zaydism which led to raise radical al-Houthis faction. The Houthi movement framed the Zaydi historical and social grievances for mobilizing Zaydi young activates. This study uses social movement approach to explain the rise of al-Houthi faction within the Zaydi revivalist movements as framework for analysis. The analysis in this study is based upon qualitative approach, using official documents, reports, books, journals as sources of data. The study found that the al-Houthi movement was influenced by internal and external factors such as the marginalization of state and spread of Wahabbism in Zaydi heartland especially in Sa'adah province. The study suggests that Yemeni government should produce a solution that can help meet the grievances of the Zaydi population. This study concludes that to reduce sectarian and other social tensions, the Yemeni government should promote and facilitate inter-sectarian dialogues and exchanges, including fostering Zaydi participation in public debates, condemning the stigmatization of the Zaydi identity and facilitating the entry of qualified Houthis into state institutions.

## خلاصة البحث

إن هذه الدراسة تحلل التفاعلات والعوامل الداخلية والخارجية والتي أدت إلى ظهور الحركة الحوثية على سبيل المثال سياسات التهميش من قبل النظام ضد الزيدية بالإضافة إلى انتشار الحركة الوهابية في معقل الزيدية، كل ذلك أدى إلى سلسلة نزاعات داخل الزيدية وهو ما أدى إلى ظهور الجناح الأصولي المتمثل في الحركة الحوثية. تأطير الحوثي للشكاوي التاريخية للزيدية أدى إلى المواجهة مع الحكومة اليمنية من خلال الاحتجاجات العامة عام 2004م. تستخدم الدراسة منهج الحركة الاجتماعية لتفسير نشأة الحركة الحوثية ضمن سلسلة حركات التجديد الزيدية كإطار للتحليل. ويستند هذا التحليل في هذه الدراسة على المنهج الكيفي، وذلك باستخدام الوثائق الرسمية والكتب والدوريات وكذلك التقارير كمصدر للبيانات. ووجدت الدراسة أن هناك عوامل داخلية وخارجية ساعدت على ظهور الحركة الحوثية، على سبيل المثال التهميش الطائفي من قبل الدولة وانتشار السلفية في معقل الزيدية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أنه لتخفيف حدة التوتر الاجتماعي والطائفي، يجب على الحكومة اليمنية أن تتبنى سياسات جديدة من خلال تبنى العديد من الحوارات مع قيادات المذهب الزيدي والإشراف على تلك الحوارات بما يضمن مشاركة الحوثيين في المناقشات العامة وإلغاء التمييز عنهم في الوظائف العامة.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Political Sciences).

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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**AL-HOUTHY MOVEMENT IN YEMEN (2004-2010)**

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*I lovingly dedicate this thesis to my precious family  
and my lovely friends:  
Yahya Ali AL-Daba (father), Waulah Ahmed Al-Daba  
(mother), Abdulmajid Al-Daba(friend), and all my  
brothers and sisters  
For the deepest prayer, love, concern, encouragement,  
and endless support*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Abstract in Arabic .....	iii
Approval Page.....	iv
Declaration .....	v
Copyright Page.....	vi
Dedication .....	vii
Acknowledgments.....	viii
List of Figures .....	xi
List of Abbreviations .....	xii

<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction .....	1
1.2 Problem Statement .....	2
1.3 Significance and Justification of the Study .....	3
1.4 Objectives of Study .....	3
1.5 Literature Review .....	4
1.6 Theoretical Framework .....	12
1.7 Assumptions.....	18
1.8 Methodology and Data Collection .....	18
1.9 Organization of Chapters .....	19

<b>CHAPTER 2: THE SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF AL-HOUTHI MOVEMENT .....</b>	<b>20</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	20
2.2 Zaydism as a Form of Religious, Political and Social phenomenon.....	21
2.2.1 Zaydism as a Religious Belief, Genealogy of Zayd and its Brief Political History in Yemen .....	23
2.2.2 Zaydism's Ideological Differences with other Branches of Shi'ia .....	28
2.2.3 Jarudism Shi'ia.....	31
2.2.4 Some Practical Differences between Zaydiyah and Sunni in Yemen .....	33
2.2.5 Zaydism's Political Tolerance .....	35
2.2.6 Zaydi Self-Definition .....	35
2.2.7 Role of Religion and Social Responsibility .....	37
2.3 The Role of Imams under the Zaydism's Political System.....	40
2.4 Post Revolution and the Future of Zaydism in Yemen .....	42
2.5 Conclusion.....	46

<b>CHAPTER 3: EARLY ZAYDI SOCIAL MOVEMENTS.....</b>	<b>48</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	48
3.2 Wahabism in the Zaydi Heartland.....	49
3.3 Major Causes of Wahabi-Zaydiyah Religious Conflict.....	54
3.4 Zaydiyah’s Counter Measures.....	56
3.5 The Formation of “al Haqq Political Party”.....	61
3.6 The Failures of al-Haqq Political Party.....	64
3.7 Conclusion.....	67
<b>CHAPTER 4: THE AI-HOUTHY MOVEMENT .....</b>	<b>68</b>
4.1 Introduction.....	68
4.2 The Evolution of al-Houthy Movement.....	68
4.3 Influence of External Factors .....	71
4.4 Hussein al-Houthy’s Conspiracy .....	73
4.4.1 Hussein al-Houthy and Militant Believing Youth .....	74
4.4.2 Houthy Family Leadership.....	78
4.4.3 The Houthis as a Charismatic Leadership.....	80
4.4.4 Evaluation of Houthy’s anti- Western Slogans.....	81
4.5 The Impetus of September 11 towards Framing Radicalism .....	84
4.6 Conclusion.....	86
<b>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND ERCOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>87</b>
5.1 CONCLUSION .....	87
5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS .....	90
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>93</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure No.</u>		<u>Page No.</u>
2.1	Map of Yemen	23
2.2	Distribution of Ethnoreligious Groups and Key Tribal Areas in Yemen	27
2.3	Sa'adah Governorate District	38
3.1	The House of al-Hadeeth in the Town of Dammaj in Sa'adah Province	54
3.2	Eid-al-Ghadir in Sa'adah Province	60
4.1	Picture of Hussien al-Houthi, the Founder of al-Houthi Movement	74
4.2	Picture of Al-Houthi Family	75
4.3	Diagram of al-Houthi Family Network	83
4.3	The Houthi Slogans	85

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

YG	Yemeni Government
BY	Believing Youth
CSO	Central Security Organization
GOY	Government of Yemen
GPC	General People's Congress
MP	Member of Parliament
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
UN	United Nations
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

Since 2004, Yemen has been the scene of a bloody civil war between government troops and local Zaydi Shii rebels in the Sa'adah governance in the Northern part of the country. These rebels are known as the Houthis, whose leaders come from a prominent Zaydi family in Northern Yemen. The rebels claim that they are fighting a war in defense of a "besieged" Zaydi religious group. For its part, the government of Yemen calls the al-Houthi leadership and their military arm, the Believing Youth, radical religious extremists and terrorists. The bloody conflict and its development along sectarian, tribal and regional lines have led writers to posit a host of explanations for the war. Although these explanations of the rebellion offer interesting accounts of the war, they fail to offer convincing arguments as to why the Houthis have abandoned a traditional approach of non-violent Zaydi Islamic social Movement and instead opted for a violent approach since 2004.

This thesis employs concepts of the social movement theory to explain the evolution and the rise of a more militant al-Houthi movement faction within the Zaydi sect. The main theme of this research is that the al-Houthi movement is a product of both exogenous and endogenous causes. On the one hand, government interactions in the non-violent Believing Youth opposition movement between 2003-2004, have led to an onslaught on the Zaydi cultural community, thereby intensifying long-held grievances.

The al-Houthi resurrection, therefore, is not merely a product of traditional social and political group grievances. Although the authoritarian political system of Ali Abdallah Salih, with the persistent socio-economic underdevelopment in the Sa'adah governorate is a major catalyst for violence, the Zaydi movement predates the Houthis and deals with these same grievances peacefully without resorting to violence. The failure of the pre-Houthi political and social movements to redress Zaydi grievances has led to internal leadership factionalism that divided the movement into a moderate and confrontational factions. The increased state suppression of Zaydi cultural symbols has caused public protests and the al-Houthi leadership's anti-government frames that account for the group's transition from a social to an insurrectionary movement.

Long years of Zaydi group grievances together with persistent government policy of marginalization, important as they are, have less to do with the Houthis' militarization than the more recent leadership strategies in both camps: the Houthis and the government. This study seeks to show that the al-Houthi movement may serve as a valuable case study.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Since 2004, the pacific Zaydi movement has been transformed into a violence-inclined one in the form of the al-Houthi movement. This movement has been plunged into blood bath pitched against government forces. Therefore, it is important to trace the evolution of al-Houthi movement in Yemen. In order to address this subject in a systematic and organized manner, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the historical and social context that has given rise to the al-Houthi movement?
- 2) What are the factors that shaped the successive failures of early pacific Zaydi movements and their subsequent evolution into Houthi?
- 3) What are the leadership style and strategy of Hussien al-Houthi that could explain the emergence and growth of the Believing Youth movement?

### **1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

In order to complete this study, it is very important to point out the objectives that the study wants to accomplish. The objectives are as follows:

- 1) To examine the al-Houthi movement in both its historical and social movement contexts.
- 2) To provide a deeper and more historical evaluation of the al-Houthi movement within the larger field of Zaydi social movements.
- 3) To provide an analysis of Zaydi historical and cultural grievances that help explain the initial rise of the movement.
- 4) To trace the growth of the more militant Believing Youth Movement, particularly the leadership style and strategy of Hussain al-Houthi.
- 5) To make some recommendations to help resolve this intractable conflict.

### **1.4 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY**

Although there are many works on this topic, they merely focus on one factor or the other, instead of looking at all the factors together. This study seeks to fill the gap. The significance of this conflict to many parties other than the Yemeni government, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, signifies the regional importance of this problem and

why it should be studied. There are many reasons why the conflict imposes such a huge attraction to many parties. For the Yemeni government, al-Houthi movement is a threat to the regime survival of the current government of Yemen whereas, for other parties like Saudi Arabia and Iran, their involvement reflects the existing Sunni-Shi'i demarcation and their individual quest for more power and influence in the Middle Eastern region.

The impacts of the conflict between the Yemeni government and the al-Houthi movement on Yemen's development in general cannot be over-emphasized. However, these impacts can be more clearly seen in the Sa'adah region where most of the clashes between the government forces and the al-Houthis' take place. It is estimated that the conflicts have resulted in the loss of US\$850 million, an amount of money which the country desperately needs to implement development projects either in Sa'adah or in any of the other governorates in Yemen.<sup>1</sup>

## **1.5 LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section presents available literature on the al-Houthi movement. It provides literature on the Zaydi social movements, the emergence of al-Houthi movement, the explanations of the conflict between Yemeni government and al-Houthi movement, and the historical background of the study. Many works have been written on the al-Houthi movement (Aldaghshi, 2010; Peterson, 2008; Dorsey, 2009; Boucek, 2010; Al-Ahmadi, 2010; Pietrzak, 2006). The review of literature on this topic reveals that a number of scholars and writers have discussed the problem from different angles. The literature review will be divided into three sections. The first section provides an

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<sup>1</sup> Jack, Freeman, "The al-Houthi insurgency in the North of Yemen: An analysis of the Shabab al-Moumineen", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 32, no. 11, (2009): 1008-1019.



analysis of earlier studies on the Zaydi sect and its historical background through different periods of time. The second section outlines the emergence of al-Houthi movement. The third section examines the explanations for the conflict between the Yemeni government and al-Houthi movement.

## **1- Historical Background**

Knowing the historical background of any subject matter is very necessary for any study. This is because it might not be feasible to make a difference without understanding the background of the study. Scholars like al-Daghshi (2010), Dorsey (2010), Petersson (2008) and a few others have written on Zaydis' historical background. Al-Dughshi outlines that Yemeni society is a pluralistic society with Muslims as the majority of citizens; yet there are two religious sects such as Zaydi sect (shiism) and shafi sect (sunnism). He highlights that Zaydism had ruled Yemen up to 1962 after which it collapsed and that led to subsequent marginalization which impacted on the cultural thought of the Zaydi sect. He adds that the Zaydi population is estimated at 30% of the Yemeni population.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Dorsey mentions that the historical roots of the conflict between the Yemeni government and al-Houthi movement are ideological, that is, following the fall of the last *Imamate*, the Zaydis experienced sectarian marginalization.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Al-Ahmadi emphasizes that the 1962 revolution in Northern Yemen brought a republican order to power. This regime imposed religious, social and political restructuring on Zaydi sect that led to common discontents among Zaydi advocates across the country.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Dughshi Ahmad, *Al- Houthi: Drasah Manhajeh*, (Sana'a: Dar al-Kutob, 2010), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Dorsey J. M, "Letter From Sana'a: On State Failure's Door," <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/features/letters-from/letter-f>> (Accessed January 13, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ahmadi Adel, *Alzahr Wal-Hajar: Fitnat Al-Houthi*, (*Sana'a: Nashwan al-Hemeri center for studies and publishment*: n.p., 2010), 34.

Some scholars look at the conflict from political and economic perspectives. For example, Bonnefoy explains that the conflict between the Yemen government and Zaydi social movement is considered a political struggle for power that started with the 1962 revolution. Since then, Zaydi sect has been affected by political and economic marginalization.<sup>5</sup> In a similar line of argument, Freeman provides a more detailed historical account of the Zaidiyya Imamate. He maintains that their struggle for power started with the 1962 revolution that ended the rule of the Zaidiyya Imamate. This eventually led to the creation of the al-Houthi movement by Hussein al-Houthi.<sup>6</sup>

Boucek highlights that the Zaydis have complained of state neglect in their region (Sa'adah, which is the centre of Zaydi sect in Yemen region, is still ignored by the Yemeni government) and its surrounding areas. Furthermore, Boucek points out that the fall of the Imamate rule has led to a crisis among the Zaydi sect followers where Zaydi scholars face the difficulty in reviving their legitimacy in the absence of an Imam. In addition, Boucek explains that after 1979 Zaydi scholars have established Zaydi teaching institutes and published new editions of Zaydi books.<sup>7</sup> In this context, Peterson emphasizes that Zaydi revivalists founded the al-Haqq party in 1990 which laid the ground for political expression. He adds that in 1992, al-Haqq party participated in the political process and in the first election and obtained two seats in the Representative Council. However, the conservative wing in al-Haqq party rejected

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<sup>5</sup> Laurent Bonnefoy, "Varieties of Islamism in Yemen: The logic of integration under pressure", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2009): 20-23.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Boucek, "War in Saada from local insurrection to national challenge", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Middle East Program*, vol. 34, no. 13 (2010): 12-30.

any kind of political participation in upcoming elections because they believed that this kind of political participation would never help them to have access to power.<sup>8</sup>

Hedberg mentions that in the early 1990s, Shaik Mogbal al-Wadii, a prominent Salafia cleric in Sa'adah region, founded Dar al-Hadith in the Damaj District and started recruiting students. Subsequently, he succeeded in attracting thousands of students to study in his own institutions. Consequently, al-Houthis considered al-Wadii as a big threat to their existence because they considered Sa'adah province to be the center of Zaydism in Yemen. These factors led to discontent among Zaydi scholars who blamed Saudi Arabia and Yemeni governments for exporting *Wahhabism*. Thus, al-Houthi movement emerged in Sa'adah as a reaction to what they perceived as an attack by *Salafisim* against Zaydi sect in their own region.<sup>9</sup>

## **2- The Emergence of the al-Houthi Movement (Believing Youth)**

Much has been written on the emergence and evolution of al-Houthi movement. Boucek believes that reading the history of the Zaydi sect after the fall of the Imamate (in 1962) and the attempt to revive Zaydi culture, shows that this movement emerged as a reaction to the marginalization against the Zaydi sect, which has led in many cases to its tendency to reconcile with the government. In return, there have been some activities between the reviving movements among the Zaydi community along the lines of generations.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Hiltermann points out that the younger Zaydi activists generally are more active in asserting their cultural identity which leads to the division in the community itself into two parts: the moderates and conservatives. The

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<sup>8</sup> Peterson J. E, "The al-Houthi conflict in Yemen: Arabian peninsula Background Note", <[www.JEPeterson.net](http://www.JEPeterson.net)> (Accessed April 13, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas J. Hedberg, *The Exploration of A wake State: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen*, (California: Naval Postgraduate School, 2010), 34.

<sup>10</sup>, Christopher Boucek, "Yemen: Avoiding a downward spiral," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, vol. 28, no. 12 (2009):14-26.

moderates' views are centered on the political participation which has resulted in the establishment of the Party of Right (al-Haqq) to ensure achieving political rights peacefully.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, Feltman indicates that the Zaydi moderate visions faced many difficulties which include the repression of the state, the suppression of the Zaydi sectarian identity and a sense of failure from the inability to access power in addition to external factors such as the spread of *Salafi* ideas in the heartland of the community. All these factors point to the emergence of a conservative wing within the Zaydi community in general, which is the adoption of the Houthi thought that worked on the mobilization of supporters and collective resources such as the youth framing them within a social movement called the Movement of Believing Youth.<sup>12</sup>

A study carried out by Glosemeyer emphasizes that Azan and Jadban founded the Believing Youth in 1990 as an alternative to the Youth Union, but the charismatic personality of Hussein al-Houthi played an important role in the mobilization and the recruitment of followers. The emergence of the Believing Youth came after the political failure of al-Haqq party in the 1992 election which led to the establishment of the Youth Union in Sa'adah province. The Youth Union was concerned with the recruitment and teaching of young Zaydis during summer holidays where they offered cultural awareness programmes through educational and religious camps to attract young Zaydi activists.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hiltermann Joost. R, "Disorder on the border: Saudi Arabia's war inside Yemen. Foreign affairs," <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65730/joost-r-hiltermann/disorder-the-border>, (Accessed February 18, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Feltman, "Yemen on the brink: Implications for U.S. Policy," Remarks delivered to House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Washington, DC, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/136499.htm>, (Accessed March 11, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Glosemeyer, Iris, and Don Reneau, "Local conflict, global spin: An uprising in the Yemeni Highlands", *Middle East Report*, vol. 28, no. 232(2004): 44-46.

Likewise, Haykel indicates that the Believing Youth was developed in a local and Zaydi context. He adds that to attract, recruit and mobilize more young Zaydi activists, they started with just one camp of 40 students; eight years later the Believing Youth had increased from three summer centers to 67 which were established in Sa'adah region and its surrounding areas that had attracted at least 20,000 students. These foundations used Zaydi culture and the Zaydi historical grievances against the government.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Houthi movement established many charities in Sa'adah region and its surrounding areas which were working at mobilizing and recruiting followers.

### **3- The Explanations for the al-Houthi Conflict**

In explaining the factors that helped transfer the al-Houthi movement from a peaceful social movement to a violent insurrectional one, Johnsen stresses that the emergence of the Salafis, who maintained ties with Saudi Arabia, and who had facilitation from the Yemeni government, has led to the emergence of the al-Houthi movement, which has been fighting for rejection of Salafi influence in Yemen. This has led the al-Houthis to view the Yemeni government as anti-Zaydi.<sup>15</sup> Landau states that to understand the Houthis' use of violence, we need to understand the existence of internal factors like the crackdown of the state against al-Houthi supporters during the protest movement. In contrast, Atarodi identifies ideology as the major factor for the

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<sup>14</sup> Bernard, Haykel, "Zaydi revival: Yemen update," 1995, 20-21, <http://www.aiys.org/webdate/hayk.html>, (Accessed April 22, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Gregory, D. Johnsen, "The sixth war in Sa'dah: Islam and insurgency in Yemen," *Waq al Waq*, <http://islamandinsurgencyinyemen.blogspot.com/2009/08/sixth-war-insadah.html>. (Accessed March 19, 2012), 8.

conflict. He explains that al-Houthi movement seeks to oust the government and impose Shi'a religious law over the whole nation.<sup>16</sup>

McGregor points out that al-Houthi movement based on Zaydi activists and headed by charismatic Zaydi leaders such as Hussein al-Houthi, represents a conflict in which local discontent and Zaydi identity claims have clashed with the state center's ways of ruling the country.<sup>17</sup> Rotberg refers to the internal factors that force the Yemeni government to fight the al-Houthi movement. One of these factors is when al-Houthi and his followers founded charities, and institutions which were substitutes to the state's institutions. With these institutions, the Houthis might be able to challenge the Yemeni government and impose their political ideology.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Salmoni and Loidolt state that the al-Houthi movement is based on its support from the Zaydi population in Northern Yemen and is centered in Sa'adah and its surrounding areas. They note that the al-Houthi's grievances include economic and social marginalization, mismanagement of government, and *Wahhabi* influence on schools and state policy.<sup>19</sup>

Carapico argues that the internal factor of poor economic and social circumstances in Sa'adah region has exacerbated the conflict. He also emphasizes that the Sa'adah region historically has suffered from underdevelopment. The central government does not have full control over Sa'adah, which has always been governed

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<sup>16</sup> Landau-Tasserou, Ella, "Zaydi imams as restorers of religion: ihya and tajdid in Zaydi literature," *Journal of Near East Studies*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1990): 247-263.

<sup>17</sup> McGregor, Andrew, "Shi'ite insurgency in Yemen: Iranian intervention or mountain revolt," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 2, no 16 (2005): 60-74.

<sup>18</sup> Rotberg, Robert, *The horn of Africa and Yemen: Diminishing the threat of terrorism, in battling terrorism in the Horn of Africa*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 55.

<sup>19</sup> Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt & Madeleine Wells, *Regime and periphery in Northern Yemen: The Houthi phenomenon*, Rand national defense research institute, Santa Monica, 2010), 30-39.

by local tribal leaders. He concludes that Sa'adah is among Yemen's poorest provinces and has not received civil support from the government.<sup>20</sup>

Another study by the Terrorism Monitor journal looks at the scenario of conflict from the political and economic deprivation perspectives. The study argues that the government's imposition of indiscriminate socio-economic deprivation on the people of Sa'adah region has generated a sense of marginalization and discrimination among them and, thus exacerbated the conflict.<sup>21</sup> Along the same line, Katz mentions that the Yemeni government has imposed restrictions on Zaydi religious schools and prevented Zaydis from performing their special celebrations like *Eid al Ghader*. This induces al-Houthis to mobilize their followers to fight against the government. The author adds that the harsh reactions by the regime to public protest movements, as those that occurred during the war against Yemeni troops in Sa'adah in 2004, have led to the radicalization of Zaydi activists.<sup>22</sup>

This glance at the literature related to al-Houthi movement shows that there are plenty of studies which address the topic. Yet, the literature focuses more on the conflict and does not specifically address the evolution of al-Houthi movement. In fact, this study is relatively new since it examines the al-Houthi movement in both its historical and social movement contexts. It addresses the emergence of the movement, its objectives and strategies of mobilization, and its evolution into a violent movement.

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<sup>20</sup> Carapico Sheila, "Elections and mass politics in Yemen," *Middle East report*, no. 185, 25 (2010): 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Katz Mark., U.S.-Yemen relations and the War on Terror: A portrait of Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salih, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, vol.2, no. 7 (2010): 32-34.

## **1.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The aim of this section is to demonstrate how the assumptions from the theory of social movement can contribute to the analysis of the al-Houthi movement. However, social movement theory encompasses a variety of approaches which have been used to explain when and why social movements emerge. These approaches include rational collective action, rational choice, resource mobilization, political opportunities, and culture framing. The framework adopted in this study combines three of these approaches which are relevant to the study of the topic, namely, rational collective action, political opportunity structure, and culture framing.

The following sections provide an overview of the basic assumptions of each of these approaches.

### **1- Rational Collective Action**

Sociologists subscribing to the rational collective action approach define movements as occurrences of individuals who are attempting to emotionally react to situations which are not under their control.<sup>23</sup> Neil emphasizes that social movements consist of individuals in large societies who share a feeling of insignificance or social detachment. Social movements, according to this approach, provide the movement members with a sense of empowerment and belonging that they would not have outside the movement.<sup>24</sup> Another basic assumption of rational collective action approach is that individuals are rational actors who try to maximize their utility through strategic calculation of the costs and benefits of alternative courses of

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<sup>23</sup> Neil Smelser, *Theory of collective behavior*, (Glencoe: Free Press, 1963), 40-42.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.