A Century of Upheaval:
The fall of the Imāmate and the Rise of the Ḥūthīs in Yemen, 1904 – 2014

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses two linked yet seemingly unrelated questions. The first is why, after more than a millennium, did the Zaydi imamate of north Yemen collapse in 1962? The second is how and why did a small Zaydi revivalist group, known popularly as the Ḥūthīs, manage to seize the state in 2015? Both of these questions, which loom over much of twentieth century history in Yemen, center on the changing modalities of what it means to be Zaydi in Yemen and the political implications of those choices. Each question can be asked and answered on its own, but to ask them in tandem allows this work to tell a broader and more important story in two distinct ways.

First, it requires one to take a step back from micro trends that often emerge from studies of shorter time periods in order to better view and understand larger trends. Second it allows for the emergence of this dissertation’s central argument: that the 1962-70 Yemeni Civil War was the pivot point in twentieth century Yemeni history. These two guiding questions help to impose order on what, from the outside, can look confusing. From the rise of the Ḥūthī movement to the group’s more recent alliance with former president ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ, who less than a decade earlier had led six successive wars against the group, contemporary Yemen often appears to be contradictory, volatile, and unpredictable. This dissertation, however, argues that such a surface reading is mistaken. The current conflict in Yemen is, in many ways, a direct result of the unfinished business of the 1962-70 Civil War, which itself was a result of an over-centralization of power by the Ḥamīd al-Dīn imāms in the first half of the twentieth century.
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There has been, as this dissertation notes, a tremendous amount of academic work on Yemen. I am indebted to many of these scholars and authors for their insights and knowledge.

Finally, I am thankful for the encouragement and love of my wife, Asha, who sacrificed and gave so that this dissertation could be complete. Our son, Aslan, was not around when the writing of this began, but he is here at its completion, and I am grateful for that.
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Introduction

This dissertation addresses two linked yet seemingly unrelated questions. The first is why, after more than a millennium, did the Zaydi imamate of north Yemen collapse in 1962? The second is how and why did a small Zaydi revivalist group, known popularly as the Ḥūthīs, manage to seize the state in 2015? Both of these questions, which loom over much of twentieth century history in Yemen, center on the changing modalities of what it means to be Zaydi in Yemen and the political implications of those choices. Each question can be asked and answered on its own, but to ask them in tandem allows this work to tell a broader and more important story in two distinct ways. First, it requires one to take a step back from micro trends that often emerge from studies of shorter time periods in order to better view and understand larger trends. Second it allows for the emergence of this dissertation’s central argument: that the 1962-70 Yemeni Civil War was the pivot point in twentieth century Yemeni history. These two guiding questions help to impose order on what, from the outside, can look confusing. From the rise of the Ḥūthī movement to the group’s more recent alliance with former president ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ, who less than a decade earlier had led six successive wars against the group, contemporary Yemen often appears to be contradictory, volatile, and unpredictable. This dissertation, however, argues that such a surface reading is mistaken. The current conflict in Yemen is, in many ways, a direct result of the unfinished business of the 1962-70 Civil War, which itself was a result of an over-centralization of power by the Ḥamīd al-Dīn imāms in the first half of the twentieth century, and that is where this study starts.

The central argument this dissertations advances is that the civil war of the 1960s should be seen as the pivot point in contemporary Yemeni history. This argument centers on Zaydi
religious and political identity throughout the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first
centuries in Yemen, and takes the form of a micro history of the key actors and events in modern
Yemeni history. The Zaydi state – the imāmate – was overthrown in 1962, but its successor – the
Republic – continued to be run by Zaydīs. However, as this dissertation makes clear there is key
difference between a Zaydi state and a state run by Zaydīs.

The dissertation covers just over a century of political upheaval and change in Yemen
and is divided into three parts. Part I focuses on the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family and its efforts to turn
the office of the imāmate into a hereditary dynasty throughout the first half of the twentieth
century. Part II details the Yemeni civil war of the 1960s, the pivot point, focusing on the
overthrow of the imāmate and the establishment of a Republic. Part III traces the unfinished
business of that war through Republican politics and the erosion of religious and cultural heritage
that ultimately led to a reaction from Yemen’s revivalist Zaydī community in the form of an
armed uprising by a group known as the Ḥūthīs.

The premise of this dissertation is that in order to properly understand the evolving role
and place of Zaydīs in Yemen it is essential to understand the local historical context out of
which this change sprung. To that end, Part I discusses how the Ḥamīd al-Dīn’s insistence on
consolidating political power first within the family under Yaḥyā (1904 – 1948) and later within
a single branch of the family under his son Aḥmad (1948 – 1962) led to a weakening of the
imāmate as a political institution, which precipitated its downfall. This was a messy and
contested process. An attempted coup in 1948 failed to establish a constitutional imāmate, but
did succeed in killing Imam Yaḥyā. Aḥmad’s eventual victory over the plotters reinforced
exactly the wrong lessons in a rapidly changing environment. The next coup, in 1962, differed in
two ways from its predecessor. First, the key plotters were military officials not Zaydī elites.
Second, they wanted to overturn the imamic system not merely reform it. It was this second coup that ended the Ḥāmīd al-Dīn dynasty and the imamate and sparked a civil war, which ultimately led to the establishment of the republic.

However, the issues the civil war of the 1960s brought into focus were never fully resolved by the new Republicans, many of whom remained culturally if not religiously Zaydī. In the 1970s and 1980s, as the civil war came to be retrospectively understood as an anti-sayyid project, the Zaydī elite of north Yemen began to wrestle with what it meant to be a Zaydī in the absence of an imām. Scholars proposed various solutions ranging from a quietist retreat from the politics of the moment to a Zaydī political party designed to be a representative voice for their concerns in Yemen’s quasi-democratic process. But none of these adequately answered the key question of how to be a practicing, pious Zaydī absent an imām. Was this even possible? As the state and various Salafī groups continued to encroach on Zaydī religious and political territory, making inroads into Ṣa‘dah, a traditional Zaydī stronghold, the Zaydī elite came to believe that they were in danger of being eradicated both politically and religiously. Seen this way, the political projects of the 1990s, in which then President ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ and his Sunni allies pressed the Zaydī traditionalists, was a continuation of the conflict that started in 1962 with the coup against Imām Muḥammad al-Badr Ḥāmīd al-Dīn.

The anti-Ḥāmīd al-Dīn movement of the 1940s and the anti-imāmate movement of the 1960s had, by the latter part of the twentieth century, evolved into an anti-Zaydī project, especially focused on sayyids. The Zaydī elite, backed into a corner, lashed out against the government and its various Salafī and jihadi allies through a loose movement of students who came to be known as the Ḥūthīs after their initial leader, Ḥusayn Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī. Over the course of six successive wars in the early part of the twenty-first century the Ḥūthīs weakened
the central government and President Šāliḥ to the point that he was unable to survive the popular protests of 2011 and 2012. In the aftermath of those protests, the Ḥūthīs were able to consolidate political power in Šaʿdah before moving on the capital of Šanʿāʾ in late 2014. The Ḥūthī takeover of what was left of Yemen’s central government sparked a Saudi response, which has since evolved into a messy and murky eight-sided civil war. The current conflict, this dissertation makes clear, has its roots in the unfinished business of the 1962 – 70 Yemeni Civil War. Although it is unlikely the Ḥūthīs will either seek to or be able to reestablish the imāamate as a political office in Yemen, the past decade has shown that the Zaydī traditionalists cannot be extinguished or ignored.¹ Their political and religious concerns will have to be considered by whatever government Yemen establishes in the aftermath of this war.

Before delving further into the details of this dissertation it is important to situate the work within the field of Yemeni studies and the growing body of academic work on the contemporary history of that country. Yemen, like Jordan, has long attracted anthropologists looking to study tribes.² In Yemen this has included scholars such as Steven Caton, who produced a work looking at tribal poetry as cultural practice.³ Paul Dresch dug further into the structure, history, and role of tribes in his strong account Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen.⁴ Shelagh Weir took a deeper if more limited look at a particular tribe in A Tribal Order.⁵ Others like Daniel Varisco have explored the history of agriculture in Yemeni history,⁶ while

¹ This dissertation considers members of the Ḥūthī movement to be a subset, albeit a rather large one, of Zaydī traditionalists.
Brinkley Messick looked at the place of texts and their role in state building in the *The Calligraphic State*. Yemen has attracted fewer historians of the modern period, at least in part because so many of the anthropologists do history so well. Paul Dresch, of course, wrote *A History of Modern Yemen*, one of the standard texts, from which this dissertation benefited. But those historians who have worked on Yemen have produced outstanding work. Most notably, Bernard Haykel’s book on Muḥammad al-Shawkānī is an intellectual history that also touches on the transformation of the imāmate. Fred Halliday’s extensive body of work on North and South Yemen has similarly proven valuable. Other earlier historians and scholars such as J. Leigh Douglas, R.B. Serjeant, G. Rex Smith, Manfred Wenner, and Venetia Porter have all contributed to a greater understanding of Yemen under the imāms. On tribes, this dissertation has benefitted significantly from the work of Najwa Adra and Nadwa Dawsari. More recently,

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13 Like Serjeant, G. Rex Smith’s many contributions are too numerous to list here. However, his contributions to Ṣan‘ā’ *An Arabian Islamic City* as well as to the volumes of *Arabian Studies* and its successor *New Arabian Studies* have been of immense value.
Jesse Ferris’ book *Nasser’s Gamble* examines the Yemeni Civil War in the 1960s through an Egyptian lens. Although there are relatively few books on the Ḥūthīs, several articles by scholars such as Laurent Bonnefoy and Marieka Brandt have done much to illuminate this group. Recent works of political science have enriched this dissertation, particularly in Part III. More generally, two studies of civil wars by Stathis Kalyvas and David Armitage have done much to shape the theoretical foundations of this study. And, of course, Yemeni scholars and writers have produced a deep and extensive body of secondary Arabic sources.

This dissertation, of course, while standing on the shoulders of these, and many other works, is distinct from all of them in both scope and content. Although this dissertation relies, in part, on fieldwork conducted during a Fulbright Fellowship in Yemen in 2003-2004, as well as research trips in 2005, 2006, 2009, 2012, and 2014 and a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship year in Egypt in 2010-11, it is not an anthropological study. This is a micro-study of local history that describes events from the ground. It assigns Yemenis the agency that other, more regional works

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fail to give them. This study of the civil war and its causes and consequences, then, differs from Ferris, who explored it through the lens of Egyptian foreign policy. This dissertation attempts to do something different, to tell the local story of this war – the pivot point of contemporary Yemeni history – explaining how events that looked so clear from Cairo and Riyadh could remain so murky on the ground. It does this, in part, by relying on a wide range of primary sources: these include chronicles and contemporary histories in Part I to memoirs and news accounts in Part II to personal interviews and contemporary reporting in Part III.

The first chapter sets the stage by examining the rule of Imām Yaḥyā, who came to power through traditional means – issuing a “summons” (da’wa) and relying on the “people who loose and bind” (ahl al-hall wa’l-‘aqd) to recognize him as imām. By the end of his rule, however, he had established the concept of both a “kingdom” as well as a “crown prince,” which could be passed on through hereditary succession, both of which were at odds with traditional Zaydī teachings. This chapter argues that two things aided Yaḥyā in his efforts to centralize political power within his own family. First, he was a skilled political operative who managed to survive and rule for more than forty years, outlasting rivals and playing challengers against one another. This political longevity allowed him to make changes that would have been impossible for someone who held the office for less time. Second, the changing nature of technology helped Yaḥyā, allowing him to more effectively administer Yemen than any of his predecessors. Due to Yemen’s relative remoteness in the first half of the twentieth century, Yaḥyā could maintain a certain degree of isolation while simultaneously benefitting from foreign technology such as the telegraph that could be kept as a Royal monopoly. Previous imāms were often forced to rely on deputies to administer far-flung provinces, but Yaḥyā could use his sons and the telegraph to bypass the larger community of sayyids and concentrate political power within the hands of the
Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. For much of his reign, Yahyā had a monopoly on these new forms of communication, which gave him a distinct advantage that he utilized well.

The second chapter “zooms in” on a key event in Yemeni history: the 1948 coup. The coup began with the assassination of Yahyā and involved a plot to simultaneously assassinate his son, Aḥmad, as well. The plotters, in direct response to the moves Yahyā had made, intended to establish a constitutional imāmate that would no longer be limited to one family and would also be checked by various councils. The coup, however, suffered from poor planning. This chapter argues that Aḥmad survived and emerged victorious due to three reasons. First, the technology that his father had utilized, particularly the telegraph, tipped him off to the assassination before the plotters could act. Aḥmad had the benefit of this technology; the plotters did not and as such were unable to effectively coordinate their plans. Second, Aḥmad was the beneficiary of a key defection, which gave him important intelligence as he was on the run attempting to rally tribes to his cause. Third, Aḥmad was able to impress upon the highland tribes through force of personality, a key part of being imām, the need to support his claim on the imāmate.

Chapter three is a bookend to chapter one and examines the fourteen-year rule of Imām Aḥmad from 1948 – 1962. This chapter argues that Aḥmad took away a key lesson from the coup, which would do much to shape the trajectory of Yemeni political history. Instead of seeing the attempted coup as a reason to arrest and reverse the process of political centralization, Aḥmad used it as an excuse to further consolidate power within his own branch of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. He believed he could not trust anyone outside his family, and continued his father’s policy of isolating the larger sayyid class, while at the same time demonstrating to his brothers that they would have a lesser role in ruling. Second, unlike his father, Aḥmad was not able to maintain a posture of isolation. By the 1950s, Yemenis traveled abroad and foreigners visited
the country with such frequency that Yemen was exposed to the currents of Arab thought coming out of Cairo and Baghdad. These intellectual trends tended to stress modernism, Arab nationalism and, later in the 1950s, Nasserism. These trends also tended to be anti-monarchical in outlook and were at least partially responsible for helping to spark revolutions in Egypt and Iraq. Third, Aḥmad had to deal with the democratization of communication technology as radios, which had been banned under Yaḥyā, became more prevalent. Technology also gave Yemenis a shared vantage point from which to view the events of the day. Finally, this chapter argues that one of Aḥmad’s final decisions – the execution of a key tribal figure and his son – undermined his son and heir’s rule before it could even begin by alienating yet one more key power bloc within Yemen. The 1962 coup took place a week after Aḥmad’s death.

Chapter four is the bookend to chapter two. While chapter two looks at the coup of 1948 and asks why it failed to lead to a constitutional imāmate, chapter four looks at the coup of 1962 and asks why it succeeded it overthrowing the imāmate. Part of the reason, this chapter contends, is that the 1962 plotters were military officers, who had much less of a stake in maintaining the imāmate, while the ones in 1948 were sayyids and intellectuals, who wanted to reform but not replace the office. The 1962 plotters looked outside the country, to Cairo and the 1952 Egyptian revolution as a template. However, in order to transform the coup into a revolution, the military officers needed the assistance of intellectual elites such as Muḥammad al-Zubayrī, a Zaydī, and Aḥmad Nu‘mān, a Shafi‘ī, as well as tribal leaders such as Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Ḥmar, whom Aḥmad had alienated by executing his father and older brother. These differences were key in bringing about a successful outcome for the 1962 coup, while Yaḥyā and Aḥmad’s successive attempts to consolidate political power within first the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family and then Aḥmad’s
own branch of the family, had weakened the imāmate to the point that it was unable to survive in the face of so many enemies.

Part II, which is composed of three chapters focusing on the civil war from 1962 – 1970, opens with chapter five and looks at the years from 1962 – 1966. The first part of the chapter focuses on international, and particularly U.S., attempts to forestall open war between two of its allies: Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This chapter argues that despite the stated goals of the various mediation attempts, the U.S. and the U.N. did not actually seek to end the Yemen war but only to ensure that Saudi Arabia and Egypt would not declare war on one another. The next section looks at the three factors of Royalists’ support. These range from what this dissertation calls a “default” setting, which saw many tribes support the imām out of muscle memory and habit, to Egyptian mistakes, which drove men into the arms of the Royalists, and finally to financial support, which allowed the Royalists to buy or, perhaps more accurately, “rent” tribal backing. This chapter also argues that there are three reasons for Egypt’s military failure in Yemen. First, the terrain, which forced the Egyptian army into fighting an unconventional war, second, and related to the first, was what this chapter calls “temperament,” which refers to how decision-making was taken out of the hands of Egypt’s highly-trained senior officer corps and placed in the hands of junior officers, who were unable to innovate. Third, was Egypt’s inability to understand Yemen’s tribal structure and its importance to pacifying the countryside. Egypt fought in Yemen as if Yemen was Egypt, with a single center that controlled the country, as if Ṣanʿā’ functioned as Cairo did. This was not the case and Egypt’s inability to adapt proved instrumental in its failure.

The sixth chapter, which covers the five years from 1962 to 1967, looks at other international actors in Yemen, particularly the UK and Saudi Arabia. This chapter argues that
the UK intervened on behalf of the Royalists in Yemen for two reasons. First, it wanted to give Nasser a “bloody nose,” after the Suez Canal embarrassment six years earlier. Second the British wanted to protect their Crown Colony, the southern port city of Aden, which was key for maintaining India. Similarly, the Saudis saw Nasser’s presence in Yemen as an existential threat to the kingdom and as such were willing to do whatever they could to support his enemies, in this case the Royalists of Yemen, and arrest his progress in the Arabian Peninsula. This chapter also argues that only with the Six Day War in 1967 did Nasser fully realize the extent of his failure in Yemen. This military defeat finally forced him to withdraw his troops from Yemen. Perhaps most importantly, this chapter also sheds some light on the traditional dichotomy of “Republican” versus “Royalist” tribes, illustrating how these labels often failed to adequately express what was happening on the ground as tribes moved back-and-forth, pursuing their own interests as opposed to acting as proxies.

Chapter seven, the last one in part II, focuses on the final years of the civil war, 1967–1969, and establishes the agency of the Yemeni actors. This chapter argues that the 1967 coup that overthrew ‘Abdullāh al-Sallāl was an effort by Yemeni Republicans to reestablish local control over the revolution. Next, this chapter examines in some depth the decisive battle of the civil war, the 1967–68 Siege of Ṣan‘ā’, which was the Royalists’ last real attempt to seize the capital and reestablish the imāmate. Chapter seven argues that this attempt failed for two reasons. First, by 1967, the tribes had come to see the war as a source of wealth in itself. Second, after five years of war, there had been a breakdown of imāmic custom and order. By this point, Imām al-Badr no longer deemed it necessary to remain in the country leading his troops, which may have contributed to the fact that his deputy and relative, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ḥamīd al-Dīn, was unable to compel his supporters to press Ṣan‘ā’ when they had the advantage.
This chapter concludes by looking at the post-siege fallout between two different Republican factions each of which had a different view of the shape of the future republic. One wanted a centralized state with a large army, and the other sought a weak center with several smaller, private armies. It was the latter view that carried the day in 1969 and 1970, which set the stage for the republic to come.

Part III is composed of two chapters. The first, chapter eight, examines the end of the war and three decades of Republican rule up until the year 2000. This chapter argues that the war ended largely because all the Royalists, with the exception of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, simply became Republicans. This did two things simultaneously. First, it allowed for the war to end with a minimum of bloodshed and revenge feuds and, second, it sowed the seeds for a future conflict by never fully deciding a key issue that the civil war had brought into focus. Namely, how was it possible to be Zaydī in a Republic? Or, put another way, how does one remain Zaydī in the absence of an imām? This chapter also argues that government neglect and anti-sayyid efforts in the 1970s and 1980s both invited and engendered a Zaydī response. Chapter eight looks at the rule of ʿAlī ʿAbdullāh Ṣāliḥ and how he was able to survive more than 30 years in power after his four immediate predecessors were removed through coups and assassinations in short order. This chapter argues that Ṣāliḥ maintained power by first relying on his family and then reversing what the Ḥamīd al-Dīn imāms had done in the early part of the twentieth century. Instead of consolidating power within his family, Ṣāliḥ brought other key families into his family through marriage, essentially making them stakeholders in the system he had created. This not only allowed him to survive throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but it would also provide his safety net when he was forced to step down in 2012.
The final chapter of part III and the dissertation as a whole, chapter nine, examines the six Ḥūthī wars from 2004 – 2010. This chapter explores why, by 2004, the Zaydī traditionalists, sometimes referred to as revivalists, were willing to fight, in particular by looking at the life and career of Ḥusayn Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī. This chapter continues the argument, introduced in chapter eight, that Ṣāliḥ’s patronage networks and the politics of marriage have both allowed him to survive where so many others have not. Chapter nine also examines the reasons for Saudi Arabia’s air war in Yemen in early 2015. This chapter suggests that Saudi intervened for two reasons. First, it wanted revenge and to erase the shame of the sixth Ḥūthī war, when Ḥūthī fighters overpowered portions of the Saudi military. Second, much like in the 1960s, Saudi Arabia was worried about the presence of a foreign power in Yemen, in this case Iran. However, this dissertation makes clear that far from being an Iranian proxy, the Ḥūthīs are actually a local group with local grievances, which are rooted in the Yemeni civil war of the 1960s and its aftermath. One thing the rise of the Ḥūthīs makes clear is that regardless of the outcome of this latest war, the concerns of the Zaydī traditionalists – how to be Zaydī in the absence of an imām – must be resolved in order for Yemen to once again become a functioning state.

This dissertation should speak to many different groups, including not only students of Yemeni history but also those concerned with the history of civil wars, pan-Arabism, the Arab Cold War of the 1960s, as well military scholars interested in counter-insurgency campaigns. It also has much to say to scholars of religious history who are concerned with motivating factors and why people and states make the choices they do. It is often argued that religion is a mask covering deeper, usually economic motivations. But this dissertation argues that religious beliefs can and often do spur individuals to action, even violent action. There is also a great deal in this dissertation for students of politics who are interested in how power is accumulated and
administered, which can be seen both through the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family who fell and were forced into exile as well as ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ who fell and yet, by making himself indispensable to so many, has been able to avoid a similar fate. Finally, policymakers will also find much of interest here on the roots of the Ḩūthī takeover and the common assumption that they are little more than an Iranian proxy operating on Saudi Arabia’s southern border.
Part I: The Imāmate (1904 – 1962)
This chapter, which is set in the first half of the 20th century, examines the changing ways in which power was acquired by the Zaydī imāms of north Yemen. In particular, it looks at the rule of Imām Yahyā (1904 – 1948), who came to power the traditional way, issuing a *da’wah* and relying on the *ahl al-hall wa-l-aqd* to recognize him as imām. By the end of his rule, however, the dynamic had changed. Instead of leaving the issue of succession in the hands of the scholars, those who “loose and bind,” Yahyā ensured that his eldest son, Aḥmad, would become imām after him. This, as many have pointed out, violated traditional Zaydī norms on how a new imām was selected. Yahyā was doing what he could get away with. When he came to power, Yemen was under Ottoman occupation. By the time he died in 1948 he had broken many of the powerful tribal families, out-maneuvered his rivals in the sayyid ranks, brought the tribes to heel, and created a dynasty and a monarchy called the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen.

Spanning much of the first half of the twentieth century, Yahyā’s rule saw him acquire more power and administer it more efficiently than the imāms who preceded him. He came to power an imām and died a king. In accumulating such an unprecedented amount of power, Yahyā’s natural political talents were enhanced by the timely deaths of key rivals, his own longevity, as well as the political upheaval that followed World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. He was a strong imām, who created a dynasty but in so doing sewed the seeds of upheaval that led not only to the overthrow of his own family but that of the entire imāmic system.
There are several reasons for this, but two primary ones emerge as major themes in this chapter. The first is internal to Yemen, and the second is external. Yahyā, as will become clear, was a skilled political actor. This was apparent from the beginning when he engineered his own da’wa, ensuring that the news of his father’s death didn’t leak prematurely while simultaneously sidelining the al-Wazīr family. Over his four decades in power, Yahyā changed the nature of the imamate, established the nucleus of a standing army, and gave his family a stranglehold on political power, which had traditionally belonged to a class not a single family.\(^1\) By making political power a hereditary right, Yahyā isolated his family from the rest of the sayyid class, thereby creating a number of powerful enemies that his family would be unable to outlast, as we will see in chapters two and three.

In addition to his natural aptitude and political skill, Yahyā was aided in his efforts by the changing nature of the world around him. When he became imām messages were still sent by messengers traveling on foot by the end of his rule he was communicating with his sons via the telegraph. The first half of the twentieth century brought more changes in less time than at any other point in Yemen’s history. Yahyā initially took advantage of these technological changes to further his political fortunes and those of his sons. The new modes of communication and emerging technologies allowed him to effectively utilize his power. But in time, his enemies would use these same technologies against Yahyā and the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty. Radio and telegraph united his enemies in a way that an imām’s rivals had never been connected previously. Initially, Yahyā had been able to survive as imām because he could deal with his enemies one at a time and, at times, use them against one another. He also benefitted from his longevity, which allowed him to put in motion several of his plans, outlasting rivals, defeating

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\(^1\) There were, as the Qāsimī dynasty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries illustrates, previous attempts to make the imāmate a hereditary office.
tribal challengers, and outmaneuvering other sayyids. But Yahya’s hoarding of power and prestige within his family eventually sparked a domestic reaction that would cost him his life and, in time, the very dynasty he had established.

Much of this chapter explores Yahya’s reign and the nature of the imamīc system in Yemen. The following three chapters – on the rule of Yahya’s son and grandson, Ahmad and Muḥammad al-Badr, respectively – build on this chapter to complete Part I. Together these four chapters on the changing nature of authority and evolving expectations in Yemen during the first half of the twentieth century set the stage for the coup and civil war of the 1960s and explain why they happened when they did. They explain how Yahya was able to use the tools of modernity – such as the telegraph and increased international influence – to build a dynasty, and how by building that dynasty andisolating his family from the rest of the sayyid class, reserving power and influence for his sons, he undermined the very system he built. Yahya had great short-term political skill. He was successful in his own life and on his own terms, outlasting all his enemies and rivals. But what he created was not, ultimately, transferrable. He was assassinated, his son survived several assassination attempts, and his grandson was overthrown within a week of taking power. By holding power so close and not letting it out of the family, Yahya shortened not only the life of the dynasty he founded but also that of the office of the imamate, which by the end of his life had become synonymous with the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family.

Imām Yahyā

In June 1904, the World’s Fair had just completed its first month in St. Louis and in Panama US army engineers were weeks into building a 51-mile canal that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Halfway around the world in the terraced mountains of southern Arabia, the imām of Yemen lay on his deathbed. Months earlier, in December 1903, the 65-
year-old Imām al-Manṣūr Muḥammad bin Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn had suffered a stroke.² A
scholar and a poet, al-Manṣūr had spent his entire time as imām in internal exile.³ In 1872, three
years after the Suez Canal opened, Ottoman troops moved south through the Red Sea to occupy Ṣanʿā’.⁴ Only 33-years-old at the time, al-Manṣūr was already a respected jurist and, just as importantly, a member of Yemen’s ruling class of sayyids. Conscious of his status, the Ottomans appointed him judge of a district north of Ṣanʿā’.⁵ The young scholar, who had a three-year-old son named Yaḥyā, accepted the position, but soon had second thoughts and returned to Ṣanʿā’.⁶ He knew his refusal would have consequences. Instead of taking up his position as a judge, the Ottoman military commander imprisoned Manṣūr along with several other local scholars, who were unwilling to acquiesce to Ottoman rule, for two years in the late 1870s.⁷

More than a decade later, in 1890, al-Manṣūr was at home in Ṣanʿā’ when he received word that the current imām of Yemen, al-Hādī Sharaf al-Dīn, who had been leading a low-level resistance to the Ottoman occupation, had died in the northern city of Ṣaʿdah. The message implored al-Manṣūr, who would soon be named imām, to leave the city before the Ottomans heard the news.⁸ After ensuring that his library would be looked after, al-Manṣūr left the city taking care not to bring weapons or anything else that might alert the Ottoman authorities to the fact that he was traveling north to take command of the flickering revolt.⁹ His son Yaḥyā, who was now 21, left by a separate gate carrying his father’s copies of the Qur’an and Sharḥ al-azhār

³ Although Muḥammad bin Yaḥyā only adopted the honorific al-Manṣūr after he became imām, for the sake of simplicity I have used the term throughout the text to refer to his entire adult life.
⁴ In local histories the Ottomans are universally referred to as “Turks.”
⁶ Manṣūr appears to have been reluctant to accept a position under an Ottoman administration.
⁷ ʿAmrī, “Muḥammad bin Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn.”
– a standard work of Zaydī jurisprudence – as well as his father’s sword and dagger. The two reconnected outside of Ṣanʿā’, where al-Manṣūr in accordance with Zaydī tradition soon called for *khurūj* “coming out” or armed rebellion against the Ottomans. After some initial gains in 1890 and 1891, al-Manṣūr’s uprising sputtered and stalled. But it never quite disappeared and for the next fourteen years al-Manṣūr and the Ottomans were locked in a back-and-forth struggle across the mountains of northern Yemen. The Ottomans held Ṣanʿā’ but – in a precursor to what later armies would face – they were unable to control the rugged area north of the capital, where al-Manṣūr maintained an area of influence protected by Yemen’s tribes.

By the time of al-Manṣūr’s stroke in late 1903, Yaḥyā had emerged as his father’s top deputy often representing him in meetings and councils. At one point in May 1904, after months of watching doctors vainly attempt to reverse the paralysis in his father’s hand, Yaḥyā decided things had stabilized to the point that he could leave his father’s side. The Ottomans were still pushing north and there was an issue a few miles south in the mountains of al-Ahnūm that needed his attention. Less than a day’s journey from ‘Idhar, where his father had fallen ill, Yaḥyā must have been confident that he could make it back to his father’s bedside if anything changed.

But less than a month after Yaḥyā’s departure, in early June, al-Manṣūr lost consciousness one morning after performing his prayers. An aide sent a hurried message to Yaḥyā, begging him to hurry back before it was too late. Now 35-years-old and a recognized scholar in his own right, Yaḥyā knew what was at stake. Succession, even in the best of times, was a contentious issue. Zaydī jurisprudence did not allow imāms to name their successors and

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10 *Khurūj*, in Zaydi jurisprudence, is a technical term that constitutes a large part of any imam’s duty, to “come out” against oppression and injustice.

11 Zabāra, *Ā’inmat al-Yaman* . III/393

sitting imāms often had to fend off rivals who believed themselves better suited for the office. Zaydī history is full of overlapping imāms and bitter fights between challengers. In Yemen, imāms held as much power as their personality and persuasion permitted. Yaḥyā reacted quickly to the news of his father’s decline, leaving al-Ahnūm for ‘Idhar and dispatching a handful of messages to prominent scholars in the area asking them to meet him at his father’s sickbed. These were the ahl al-hall wa‘l-‘aqd, “those who loose and bind;” the men who would recognize the next imām. By the time Yaḥyā reached ‘Idhar it was already too late. Al-Manṣūr never regained consciousness and two days later he died. Sequestered in the village citadel where his father had been taken, Yaḥyā waited a day before informing the scholars he had summoned to ‘Idhar that the imām was dead. Then, in accordance with Zaydī tradition, Yaḥyā issued the da‘wa, or proclamation and summons, to be the new imām after his father. But the ahl al-ḥall wa‘l-‘aqd Yaḥyā had hand-selected, likely with just such a scenario in mind, refused to be rushed into a decision. Some of them worried that the 35-year-old Yaḥyā did not meet all the conditions required of an imām. Others wanted to at least contemplate alternative choices.

Whatever their reservations, Yaḥyā’s plan to gain immediate support from a key nucleus of scholars seemed to be coming apart as the ahl al-ḥall wa‘l-‘aqd dithered in the hours after al-Manṣūr’s death. By simultaneously announcing his father’s death and his own succession, Yahya had wanted to present any other potential candidates for the imamate with a fait accompli. His plan would not prevent contenders from putting themselves forward but it would make their

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13 Zabāra, Ā’immat al-Yaman . III/403.
14 al-Muṭahhar, Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā, pg. 87. Most sources put 11 scholars at ‘Idhar at the time of Imām Manṣūr’s death.
15 Da‘wa, as R.B. Serjeant argues, is impossible to render into English in a word or two. The basic idea in this context, however, is to proclaim oneself imām and to summon the believers. I have used the shorthand of “proclamation and summons” to express this concept.
16 See al-Muṭahhar’s discussion of some unanswered questions about why Yaḥyā sent messages to the scholars he did and not others in Sīrat al-imām yaḥyā, pg. 87.
path to the imamate much more difficult. Yaḥyā would have the advantage of a head start as well as the public support of several leading scholars. Well-schooled and ambitious, Yaḥyā likely realized that this type of momentum would have been difficult to overcome. But the longer the scholars talked without recognizing his candidacy the more likely it was that the news of his father’s death would spread and someone else would declare for the imamate before Yaḥyā’s support was secure. Like his father fourteen years earlier, Yaḥyā needed to keep the death of the imām a secret.

Nāṣir bin Mabkhūt, a tribal shaykh from ‘Uṣaymāt of Ḥāshid, shared Yaḥyā’s frustration. Although he was not a member of the sayyid class of scholars and as such was not eligible for the imamate himself, Nāṣir’s support along with that of the ‘Uṣaymāt tribe he led mattered a great deal. The imāms needed the tribes and their armed fighters to rule. Nāṣir couldn’t be the imām, but his backing could make an imām. He had often supported Imām al-Manṣūr, and now he was ready to do the same for al-Manṣūr’s son. There were other ties to consider as well. Yaḥyā was married to Nāṣir’s foster daughter, and the scholars were deliberating in Ḥāshid territory. As the deliberations of ahl al-ḥall waʾ-ʾl-ʿaqd dragged on, Nāṣir lost his patience and took matters into his own hands. Stationing several of his tribesmen outside the room where the ahl al-ḥall waʾ-ʾl-ʿaqd were discussing Yaḥyā’s daʾwa, Nāṣir stepped inside and locked the door behind him.

“We have no hope other than Yahyā,” he warned the assembled scholars. “And none of you are leaving until you swear your oath of allegiance.” Then as the men in the room

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18 Sayyid (pl. sāda) are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. In Zaydī jurisprudence only Muhammad’s descendants through his daughter Fāṭima and his son-in-law ‘Alī are eligible to rule as imām.


20 Quoted in al-Muṭahhar, Sīrāt al-imām yahyā, pg. 83. Al-Muṭahhar discounts the story, claiming that scholars would not have been intimidated by a tribal shaykh, but most other sources agree that Nāṣir bin Mabkhūt played a key role in securing the bayʿa of several scholars for Yahyā.
watched, Nāṣir swore the *bay’a*, or oath of allegiance, to Yahyā, recognizing him as the imām.

Sufficiently cowed by the powerful tribal shaykh and his performance, the *ahl al-ḥall wa’-l-‘aqd* followed his lead. With the scholars finally in agreement, Yahyā announced his father’s death and positioned himself at the head of a funeral procession that snaked several miles southeast through the mountains to the village of al-Ḥūth. Whatever the intent of Yahyā’s march to al-Ḥūth, where he would bury his father, it served as a way for him to solidify public support. By the time the crowd of shaykhs and trailing tribesmen reached al-Ḥūth it had swelled to more than 1,500 all of whom recognized Yahyā as their imām. That same day, June 4, 1904, Yahyā issued his public *da’wa*, taking for himself the honorific *al-Mutawakkil ‘alā Allāh*, or “He who relies on God.”

Less than a week after Yahyā’s *da’wa*, a challenger emerged in the north. On June 10, 1904 Ḥasan bin Yahyā al-Ḍaḥyānī, a 40-year-old sayyid from Şa‘dah who had often clashed with Yahyā’s father, issued his own proclamation and summons.²¹ Al-Ḍaḥyānī charged Yahyā with *wiratha*, of “inheriting” the imamate from his father. A serious accusation and a violation of Zaydi principles, this charge by al-Ḍaḥyānī was used to smear Yahyā in Şa‘dah and gain the support of several local tribes. Al-Ḍaḥyānī’s *da’wa* put Yahyā in a difficult position. As a new imām he was obligated to call for a *khurūj* against the Ottomans much the same way his father had 14 years earlier when he became imām. But now instead of fighting a single enemy, he would be battling two. Zaydi jurisprudence allowed for two imāms, but some scholars worried about the practical implications of competing imāms. They wanted to see them fight the Ottomans, not each other. One of these scholars, Aḥmad bin Qāsim Ḥamīd al-Dīn, organized a large gathering of the *ahl al-ḥall wa’-l-‘aqd* in southern Şa‘dah with the idea that the community

of scholars would select between Yaḥyā and al-Ḍḥyānī, presumably on the basis of a
determination as to which one best fulfilled the conditions for the post.22

As a precaution and to ensure that both men abided by the consensus of the scholars,
Aḥmad bin Qāsim asked that both imāms send hostages.23 Yaḥyā complied with the traditional
request by sending his eldest son, the nine-year-old Aḥmad, north to Aḥmad bin Qāsim. Then,
Yaḥyā left his stronghold at ‘Idhar and followed his son north at the head of a company of
tribesmen and several scholars, who had promised to support him at the meeting. At the same
time Yaḥyā was moving north, al-Ḍḥyānī was traveling south with his own group of supporters.
Yaḥyā arrived at the central meeting place first, and a rumor soon reached Ḍḥyānī that his rival
had sent an assassin to kill him.24 Fearing for his safety on the rugged mountain roads, where
ambushes were common, al-Ḍḥyānī halted his men before electing to avoid the gathering
altogether. Absent al-Ḍḥyānī, which may have been the point of the rumor, the ahl al-ḥall wa’-
l-‘aqd pledged their support to Yaḥyā. Al-Ḍḥyānī and his closest supporters refused to abide by
the scholars’ decision, but for the vast majority of Yemen’s ‘ulama the issue was now resolved:
Yaḥyā was the imām. It would be six more years, before tribesmen loyal to Yaḥyā would finally
besiege al-Ḍḥyānī and force him to sue for peace, but after the meeting in Ṣa’dah Yaḥyā’s claim
was secure.

Zaydī State Building in Yemen

In the wake of World War I Ottoman troops withdrew from Yemen, leaving Imām Yaḥyā
in control of what had once been contested territory. Yaḥyā returned to Ṣan’ā’ in 1918, more

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23 The hostage system in Yemen was used by the imāms as a means of controlling far-flung tribes, many tribal
shaykhs also kept their own “hostages” as well from prominent families. In practice this meant that an individual,
often a young son or relative, was handed over to the imām or shaykh as a way of ensuring their relatives continued
good behavior or, in some cases, adherence to a particular agreement. The system was depicted in a popular novel,
The Hostage, by Zayd Dammaj and has since been translated into English. al-Akwa’, “al-Ḍḥyānī,” 1913 – 1915.
than 28 years after he had left the city with his father for an internal exile of opposition to
Ottoman rule. It is difficult to overstate the importance of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire
for the region as whole, but in Yemen, Yaḥyā inherited the apparatus of a state. Prior to Yaḥyā
there had been no national army in Yemen, as imams had traditionally relied on tribal levies.
These would continue to play a role both under the Ḥamīd al-Dīn imams as well as under
successive Republican regimes and continue to be used today. But after Yaḥyā they would no
longer be the exclusive means of military force available to an imām. In addition to some of the
technological developments discussed below, the formation of a modern army – even an
embryonic one – allowed Yaḥyā to consolidate more control over greater areas of the northern
Yemeni highlands than previous imāms had been able to accomplish.

Traditionally, the Zaydī imāms in Yemen had struggled to fully consolidate power.
Often this was a result of outside entities and rivals such as the Ottomans in the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, the Ayyubids in the twelfth century, and their successors the Rasulids in the
thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. Further south, of course, after 1839 was the
presence of the British, which led to a series of disagreements and, after Yaḥyā returned to
Ṣanʿā’, even provoked some clashes. Still, with the withdrawal of the Ottomans after World War
I, Yahyā had a window of opportunity to solidify his grip on power that many of his predecessors
had not had. Perhaps, the most obvious parallel to Yaḥyā in this regard was the Qāsimī imāms of
the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Like the later Ḥamīd al-Dīn imāms, the Qāsimī imāms

25 This, of course, helped to shape the modern nation-state boundaries that, in many cases, continue to exist today.
26 See for instance, the “popular army” formed by the great-grandsons of Naṣīr bin Mabkhūt (the sons of Shaykh
‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar) to combat the Hūthīs.
27 For more on the Ayyubids and Rasulids see the paper by Daniel Varisco, “Heirs of the Ayyubids: the Formation
of the Rasulid State in Yemen,” delivered at the Middle East Studies Association Conference, October 2013, New
Orleans.
initially had to combat an Ottoman occupation and later established a dynasty. The Qāsimī dynasty eventually collapsed under the combined pressure of internal discord – often referred to by the chroniclers as corruption – and outside forces. Much the same, as we shall see, happened to the Ḥamīd al-Dīn imāms, albeit in a more compressed time frame.

**Hereditary Succession in Zaydism**

In 1923, years after the Ottomans had withdrawn from Ṣanʿāʾ in the wake of World War I, Yahyā found himself in the middle of another debate over imāmic succession. Nāṣir bin Mabkhūṭ was dead and Ḥasan al-Ḍāḥyānī had faded to an irrelevant afterthought, when three government officials approached Yahyā in September of that year with an idea. They wanted the 54-year-old Yemeni leader to designate a successor. The trio – the governor of Ṣanʿāʾ, the military commander of Ṣanʿāʾ and the governor of Bilād al-Rūs – suggested Yahyā name his eldest son, Aḥmad whom he had once sent north as a hostage, as crown prince. Aḥmad was far from Yahyā’s most popular son. Harold Ingrams, the British political officer in Aden who met him later in life, described Aḥmad as “cruel” and “hated.” Yemenis were just as uncompromising in their descriptions. Some referred to him as “Aḥmad the jinn,” while others

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28 There are other compare and contrast cases one could make with regards to Yahyā. Outside of Yemen, perhaps, it is most instructive to compare him to Amanullah Khan, the King of Afghanistan from 1919 – 1929, who also had to deal with strong, independent minded-tribe. Indeed, even today, one often hears comparisons between Yemen and Afghanistan, although in the current climate this often has more to do with “rugged geography,” the perceived un-governability of the two countries, and the spread of Islamic terrorism, particularly in the form of al-Qaeda. Unlike Yahyā, who would have never considered himself a “modernizer” or a “reformer”, Amanullah willingly took on both titles, attempting to westernize his country through a series of reforms, including a new school curriculum, a new constitution, and an attempt to limit customs that had restricted female codes of dress. But like Yahyā, Amanullah was a monarch – one who attempted a different approach – but ultimately, neither Yahyā or Amanullah’s vision for the state much survived either’s reign.

29 Corrupt or worldly imams were referred to as aʿimmat al-dunyā (imāms of the world) while the more honorable were referred to as aʿimmat al-din (imāms of religion. See Bernard Haykel, Revival and Reform: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 72.


called him simply al-Baḥḥūt, or the Terrible. But, as Ingrams added, he was also “strong and fearless,” and in the nearly two decades since Yahyā had been named imām, Aḥmad had emerged as a hard and capable military commander. He had conquered the Tīhama, which had long been beyond Yahyā’s control, and he also began a process of breaking the power of the great shaykhly families which led the various tribes. The determination and ruthlessness that Aḥmad brought to his conquests had been evident since childhood. Once, during a study break, the young prince had pulled a knife on his friends and forced them to swear to support him as imām when his time came. Regardless of Aḥmad’s qualifications, the proposal cut against centuries of tradition and much of Zaydī theology and practice. Yahyā, of course, had succeeded his own father as imām, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Qasimī dynasty had institutionalized hereditary succession. But Yahyā had to go to war to prove his merits and had a reputation for being learned in the religious tradition, whereas the dynastic Qasimīs were perceived as an aberration. Local historians later rationalized the dynasty’s demise by saying they were more like kings than imāms. Others referred to their rule simply as “the time of corruption” (ayyām al-fasād), which is a common trope for designating the times of illegitimate rule. Conscious of this history, Yahyā was non-committal, telling the trio that this was a matter for the scholars to decide. The three men took Yahyā’s careful response as tacit encouragement and they spent the next several months recruiting scholars to their cause. In August 1924, several of these scholars issued a statement arguing for the appointment of Aḥmad

37 al-Wazīr, Ḥayāt al-amīr, 209.
as wali al-‘ahd. Among those who signed the statement was Ḫusayn al-‘Amrī, the chief judge in
the Court of Appeals and one of Yahyā’s earliest instructors. The two remained close throughout
their lives and in 1918, when the Ottomans withdrew from Ṣan‘ā’, Yahyā had stayed at his
former teacher’s house upon entering the city. The other signatories were similarly well
credentialed and while many of them were close to Yahyā they also had a history of independent
thought. What bound them together was a particular worldview. All of the signatories were
the scholarly heirs of Muḥammad al-Shawkānī, an eighteenth and nineteenth century Yemeni
jurist who did much to bring Sunni tenets into Zaydī thought. Their statement reflected this
training. It was “purely Sunni” in tone, and argued that a consensus among the scholars
necessitated the naming of a crown prince. As he had a year earlier, Yahyā reacted cautiously.
Aware that the statement contradicted the norms of the Zaydi-Hādawī school of law upon which
the imāmate legitimacy ultimately rested, Yahyā said nothing and did nothing. But the seed
had been planted.

Two years later, in another break with Zaydī tradition, Yahyā adopted the title “His
Majesty the King of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen,” in a treaty with Italy. The
language of the treaty, particularly the use of the phrase saḥib al-jalāla al-malik, “His Majesty
the King,” angered several scholars who objected to Yahyā describing himself as a king. An
imām, they reminded Yahyā, was not a king and that kind of lofty terminology should be

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38 Dresch, A History of Modern Yemen, 28.
39 For a partial list of the signatories see: al-Wazīr, Ḥayāt al-amīr, 209 – 210. Men such as Zayd al-Daylamī could and did oppose Imām Yahyā when they disagreed with him. See, for instance, Dresch’s discussion in A History of
Modern Yemen, 49 and 53.
40 Bernard Haykel, Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muḥammad al-Shawkānī, New York: Cambridge
41 Haykel, Revival and Reform, 211.
42 Haykel, Revival and Reform, 3, 211.
43 Haykel, Revival and Reform, 211 – 212.
44 al-Wazīr, Ḥayāt al-amīr, 212; see also: Haykel, Revival and Reform, 211 -212.
reserved for God alone. Yaḥyā attempted to calm their fears by explaining that the phrase was part of international protocol and not a change in how he viewed his office. Even though he had been imām for more than two decades, Yaḥyā’s position was still precarious. South along the coast at Aden sat the British, who after the Ottomans withdrew in 1918 had strengthened their alliance with Muḥammad al-Idrīsī, a figure from ‘Asīr and one of Yaḥyā’s rivals, by granting him the Red Sea port city of Ḥudaydah. With Idrīsī to his north and west and the British to his south, Yaḥyā needed a counterweight. The obvious choice was Italy, which had colonies across the Red Sea in east Africa. Idrīsī died in 1923 and with his demise, the British reevaluated their approach to southern Arabia. Five years of maneuvering along the Red Sea coast had gained them little. Yaḥyā appeared to be growing stronger in the interior and their main ally was now dead. Britain decided a change was in order, and support to Idrīsī’s heirs was cut off. But it was a slow process that took months to implement, and Yahyā, who was miles inland at Ṣanʿāʾ and unaware of the policy shift, was still sufficiently worried that he signed the treaty with Italy three years after Idrīsī’s death.

Yaḥyā pursued a similar strategy of shifting alliances domestically. For all his political acumen, he had always needed help. Nāṣir bin Mabkhūt, the powerful tribal leader from Ḥāshid, had been instrumental in helping him become imām and ‘Alī al-Wazīr, a sayyid from Banī Ḥushaysh just outside of Ṣanʿāʾ, had played a key role in organizing Yaḥyā’s triumphal entry into the city in 1918. Other members of the al-Wazīr family had won Lower Yemen for him. But these alliances could be fleeting.

45 al-Wazīr, Hayāt al-amīr, 212
46 al-Wazīr, Hayāt al-amīr, 212
50 Lower Yemen is, for our purposes, from Yarim southward.
In 1911, Nāṣir bin Mabkhūt broke with Yaḥyā over his signing of the treaty of Da‘ān, which had recognized Yahyā’s control over upper, or Zaydī Yemen and effectively made him an Ottoman ally.51 Yaḥyā saw the treaty as a political necessity, a calculated compromise that would allow him to strengthen his hand among the tribes in the north, but Nāṣir viewed it as a betrayal by the man he had helped make imām. Furious with Yaḥyā’s decision, the tribal shaykh deserted to Muḥammad al-Idrīsī, who at the time was the only major figure left in north Yemen fighting the Ottomans. After the Ottomans withdrew, Yaḥyā retaliated by sending his son Aḥmad north against the al-Aḥmar family. Aḥmad moved quickly, building forts in Ḥāshid territory and, over the course of the next few years, bringing the family to heel.52 When Nāṣir bin Mabkhūt and Muḥammad al-Idrīsī died in quick succession in 1921 and 1923 respectively, no one was left to stand against Aḥmad. For the first time since he had been named imām, Yahyā had a free hand in the north. Aḥmad easily defeated Nāṣir’s two sons, forcing the eldest into exile and then dictating terms on the younger brother, Ḥusayn, who had taken over leadership of the tribe.53 This, in a nutshell, was Yaḥyā’s strategy: He broke families but he never completely destroyed them, preferring to leverage them against other families and tribes in a balancing act that a later ruler of Yemen would describe as “dancing on the heads of snakes.”54

Not every confrontation, however, was so direct. The Aḥmars were tribesmen not sayyids. Crushing recalcitrant tribes was one thing, but outmaneuvering potential rivals for the imāmate required a more subtle approach. In the 1920s, Yahyā had rewarded sayyid allies like the al-Wazīr family for their help in subduing Lower Yemen. He named ʿAlī al-Wazīr governor

54 Ṣāliḥ is fond of this phrase and has used it many times, including in a March 2009 interview with the pan-Arab daily, *al-Hayat*. Victoria Clark, a British journalist, took it as the title for her book, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010.
of Ta‘izz, put ‘Abdollāh al-Wazīr in Ibb and gave the governorship in Dhamār to Muḥammad al-Wazīr.\(^{55}\) But these were complicated relationships, less of ruler to subject than of peers and Yahyā often had to persuade more than command. As his position grew more secure and the threats fell away – first the Ottomans, then Idrīsī and the al- Ağmar family – Yahyā grew bolder and slowly started the delicate process of consolidating power within his immediate family.

Whatever his private thoughts had been when the issue of a crown prince was first broached, by the early 1930s it was now clear that Yahyā wanted one of his 14 sons to succeed him. And as the trio of government officials had suggested years earlier, the best choice was Aḥmad.

Yahyā’s eldest son wasn’t as popular as his younger brother Muḥammad, who drowned at sea in 1933 while trying to save a servant who had wandered too far from shore during a picnic. Nor did Aḥmad enjoy an untroubled relationship with his father. Yahyā rarely hesitated to contradict Aḥmad’s orders and sometimes went as far as to mock his eldest son.\(^{56}\) But in the end, Yahyā believed that Aḥmad was his strongest son and the one most likely to hold the kingdom – as Yemen was now being called – together. Ahmad was the “stopper-stone,” as Yahyā told his other sons who were desperate for their father’s support.\(^{57}\)

In order to neutralize future threats to Aḥmad’s rule, Yahyā pursued what was essentially a two-track strategy of inducements and intimidation. He married one of his daughters to a son of ‘Alī al-Wazīr, the powerful governor of Ta‘izz.\(^{58}\) Other sons he sent to Banī Ḥushaysh, al-Wazīr’s home village, where they took up residence. The move, couched as an honor, was both an implicit threat and a financial drain. The al-Wazīr family was now under surveillance and they had to foot the bill for their princely guests. Yahyā made other changes as well. For

\(^{56}\) Serjeant, “The Post-Medieval and Modern History of Ṣan‘ā’,” 100.
\(^{58}\) Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, 49.
centuries, the title sayf al-islam, the sword of Islam, had been used as an honorific by noted sayyids in Yemen. Now, Yahyā began restricting its use. He didn’t strip anyone of the title, instead he let time take its toll and as the older men died he neglected to replace them. Soon the title was only used by his sons, and came to signify a mark of royal lineage. But Yahyā’s biggest move came in 1937, when the 73-year-old imam announced a ministerial reshuffle. Like the royal title, each ministry would now be the domain of one of his sons. That same year, Yahyā began easing out members of the al-Wazīr family from their posts as governors. In May 1937, Yahyā sent a message to ‘Alī al-Wazīr, informing the governor that Aḥmad would soon be on his way to Ta‘izz, but that he wouldn’t stay long.59 Yahyā sent another son, Ḥasan, to Ibb where ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr was governor. A third son was dispatched to Ḥudaydah, the Red Sea port city, and within months the al-Wazīrs were out and Yahyā’s sons were governors as well as ministers. The Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty was taking shape under Yahyā’s careful coordination.

In a little over three decades, Yahyā had changed the nature of the imāmate and outlasted all of his old enemies. The aging imām had given his family a lock on power. But his years of carefully calibrated moves had created dozens of new enemies frustrated with being shutout of power. And it was these men that now started to plot against the imām.

Technology and the Imāmate

While Yahyā had been working to consolidate power the country around him had changed dramatically. Never a static place, the first half of the twentieth century brought more changes in less time than at any other point in Yemen’s history. In 1904, when Yahyā became imām, letters were still sent by messenger and men traveled by foot and on horseback, but by the late 1930s he was communicating with his governors by telegraph and cars and planes had been introduced to the country. Often caricatured by his opponents as a man who never traveled much

59 al-Wazīr, Ḥayāt al-amīr, 317.
beyond a hundred miles from where he was born, Yahyā was in fact much closer to a pragmatist than he was an isolationist. He was wary and cautious of the outside world, but he was also willing to take advantage of it when he believed action was necessary. The treaty with Italy in 1926 is one example. What mattered to Yahyā was maintaining power, and he did whatever he could to ensure that he remained imām and that his family stayed strong in Yemen. Yahyā didn’t overreach, refusing one scholar’s request that he put himself forward as the new caliph after the office had been abolished in Turkey in 1924 in the wake of World War I. After the treaty with Italy he dispatched one of his sons to follow-up with Mussolini’s government, and in 1935 Yahyā sent five soldiers to Baghdad to study at the radio and telegraph school. Other missions followed and young Yemeni men soon started to travel to Cairo to study. The world these young men found in Cairo, Baghdad, and Beirut was far different from anything they had experienced at home. It was familiar and Arab, yet exotic and foreign at the same time. For the first time they saw Yemen – their shared experiences and common assumptions – as outsiders. What had once seemed normal and expected now appeared strange and, all too often, backward. Far from home and looking to fit in, the students and soldiers were poorly prepared for life outside of Yemen.

One of these young Yemenis in Cairo, Ahmad Nu’mān, approached an Egyptian contact in 1936 and explained that he wanted to attend King Fuad I University. “Do you have a baccalaureate?” the man asked.

“No,” Nu’mān answered. Baccalaureates were uncommon in Yemen where the more traditional ijāza, or certificate, was prevalent. Then the Egyptian asked him if he had a

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“secondary degree.” Again, Nu‘mān had to respond that he didn’t. He hadn’t studied a foreign language, which universities like King Fuad I preferred. Frustrated and more than a little embarrassed that his years of study didn’t meet the minimum entrance requirements for a modern university, Nu‘mān listened as he was told his best chance was al-Azhar, a more traditional university in the heart of Cairo. Nu‘mān had spent seven years studying at the feet of shaykhs in Zabīd collecting several ijāzāt, but none of that mattered in Cairo. Instead of attending the university he wanted, he had to enroll at al-Azhar, which he worried would simply be a repeat of his training in Zabīd. The 26-year-old future politician was angry for himself and ashamed for his country. Out of that shame came a desire for change and reform in Yemen. Along with Nu‘mān, other students and future leaders – men like Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Zubayrī, ‘Abdullāh al-Sallāl and Ḥasan al-‘Amrī – spent formative years abroad, mixing and mingling with a new generation of Arab thinkers and writers. All of these men would, in one way or another, play pivotal roles in the struggle to unseat the Hamīd al-Dīn family. They weren’t alone. Yahyā’s moves over the past two decades had given them plenty of potential allies at home and, after the purge of governors in 1937 and 1938, many of Yahyā’s former officials and notable sayyids, particularly in the al-Wazīr family, went looking for help and allies. ‘Alī al-Wazīr, the man who had conquered Lower Yemen and been governor of Ta’izz, left Yemen for Saudi Arabia. In his request to Yahyā for permission to travel abroad, al-Wazīr explained he wanted to perform the hajj now that his official duties were over, but that was merely a cover. The real reason for his trip was a meeting with Saudi King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Sa‘ūd. Years

63 Nu‘mān, Mudhakkirāt, 27.
64 Douglas, Free Yemeni Movement, 47
65 Douglas, Free Yemeni Movement, 47.
66 al-Wazīr, Ḥayāt al-amīr, 343.
earlier, in 1934, Ibn Sa‘ūd’s Wahhabi raiders had wrested the northern regions of ‘Asīr and Najrān away from Yahyā. But the Saudi king was wary of delving too deeply into Yemen’s internal politics, and al-Wazīr returned empty-handed.

In the years that followed, these two strands – students abroad and sayyids at home – gradually came together to form a single thread of broad opposition to Imām Yahyā. In addition to members of the al-Wazīr family, the domestic thread included individuals like Aḥmad al-Muṭā’, a poor yet precocious young sayyid who helped form the semi-secret Hay‘at al-Nidāl, or the Opposition Society. Both of these strands sought to save the imāmate from what they considered to be Yahyā’s excesses. They wanted reform, not revolution. They were even willing to keep the imāmate within the Hamīd al-Dīn family, offering to support one of Yahyā’s son, Ḥusayn, whom they considered more pious and worldly than his brothers. They wanted change, and were worried Yahyā had spent too long in charge and consolidated too much power. In time, this same underlying feeling would lead to a desire to overthrow the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family and later to abolish the imāmate altogether. But in the late 1930s and early 1940s, they only wanted a change from Yahyā. Above all these opposition figures dreamed of creating an imāmate that was at once more traditional in its sharing of power and more open in its interactions with the outside world.

Looking back at Yahyā’s three decades in power, both the students and the sayyids realized that Yahyā had managed to outmaneuver all of them as he gradually accumulated more power for his family. By the mid 1940s, the opposition started to worry that Aḥmad would be little more than a continuation of his father, and so the two groups began preparing for the future.

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69 Douglas, Free Yemeni Movement, 123.
while simultaneously trying to win the crown prince over to their side. By 1942 both Aḥmad Nu’mān and Muḥammad al-Zubayrī had returned from their stints in Cairo. Nu’mān had been forced to return after a trip to Switzerland revealed that his travel documents were “inadequate” and Egyptian authorities refused to grant him a visa. 70 Al-Zubayrī had come back a year earlier, carrying with him copies of a pamphlet, pretentiously entitled: al-Barnāmīj al-awwal min barāmīj shabāb al-amr bi’l-ma‘rūf wa ‘l-nāḥy ‘an al-munkar, or The First Program of the Youth for Enjoining of the Good and Forbidding of the Wrong. 71 Yaḥyā rewarded the young poet with nine months in prison, a common deterrent that many of Yemen’s top officials endured periodically, telling his family that al-Zubayrī had “broken all of the holy laws.” 72 When al-Zubayrī was freed in September 1942 he joined Nu’mān at Aḥmad’s court in Ta’izz, where the pair along with several other colleagues attempted one last time to influence the crown prince. The literary discussions and relatively freewheeling conversations lasted little more than a year.

In May 1944, the two sides reached an impasse. Aḥmad was unconvinced by their subtle yet never ending pressure to reform and change the very system that seemed set to deliver him the imāmate he had coveted since childhood. During a discussion of the life of Imām ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet Muḥammad’s cousin and son-in-law, Aḥmad lost his temper after one of the reformers compared Imam ‘Alī to a contemporary nationalist fighting oppression, exclaiming: “I ask God that I do not die until this sword of mine has been colored with the blood of the modernists.” 73 After the crown prince’s outburst, Nu’mān, al-Zubayrī, and the reformers who were still in town fled Ta’izz for Aden and British colonial protection. From the steamy port city, more than 200 miles south of Ṣan‘ā’, the plotting against Yaḥyā and Aḥmad picked up.

70 Douglas, Free Yemeni Movement, 54.
71 Douglas, Free Yemeni Movement, 54.
72 Quoted in Douglas, Free Yemeni Movement, 56.
73 Quoted in Douglas, Free Yemeni Movement, 63.
speed. Nu‘mān and al-Zubayrī were now convinced that the pair would never change.\textsuperscript{74} They had to be forced out.

As the months slipped by in Aden, Nu‘mān and al-Zubayrī busied themselves with writing for Ṣawt al-yaman, a weekly newspaper, and establishing what they called Hīz b al-ahrār al-yamaniyyān, The Free Yemeni Party. In the north, under Yahyā’s watchful yet aging eye, the al-Wazīr again reached out to Ibn Sa‘ūd in Saudi Arabia at the end of 1946 and began debating possible successors for the now 82-year-old imām. ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr, the former governor of Ibb and Ḥudaydah who had recently returned from Cairo, emerged as the frontrunner. In late 1947 the reformers in Ṣan‘ā’ drew up a secret document they called al-Mīthāq al-waṭanī al-Muqaddas, or the Sacred National Pact, which they believed would guide and limit the next imām. A copy of the document was sent to Nu‘mān and Zubayrī in Aden for printing. For years the reformers had been taking advantage of burgeoning technologies, using printing presses, ease of travel and telegraphs to spread their ideas. On January 16, 1948 that same technology almost proved their undoing. That day Nu‘mān and al-Zubayrī received a coded cable, which was the signal that Yahyā had died and ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr was in charge. Much like Yahyā had 44 years earlier, the reformers knew the importance of being first and Nu‘mān and al-Zubayrī promptly printed the list of officers in al-Wazīr’s new government as well as the Sacred National Pact.\textsuperscript{75}

In Ṣan‘ā’, a still very much alive Yahyā, read his own obituary and the pact in the next day’s batch of telegrams. The imām knew just what to do. With the papers in hand, Yahyā approached ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr, who was working in the imām’s public majlis, handing him the

\textsuperscript{74} For a Ḥamīd al-Dīn centric view of the dissidents in exile, some of whom gathered around Ibrāhīm, one of Yahyā’s sons, see chapter 14 in Aḥmad al-Shāmī, Riyāḥ al-tagḥīyr fī l-yaman, Jiddah: al-Maṭba‘a al-‘Arabiyyah, 1984.

\textsuperscript{75} Douglas, Free Yemeni Movement, 134.
bundle. “Have a look at these,” the imām instructed. Glancing quickly at the pile, al-Wazīr shuddered as he skimmed the first page. But Yahyā, who was watching his reaction carefully, interrupted his hurried denials. “Look at them all first, and then we’ll talk.” When he was finished reading, a rattled al-Wazīr swore an oath that he had nothing to do with the Sacred National Pact. Yahyā later published al-Wazīr’s disavowal in al-Imān, the official newspaper of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom. Forced into the open by the coded telegram, they now believed had come from Aḥmad, the reformers scrambled to improvise a new plan. The hastily devised plot called for assassinating both Yahyā and Aḥmad in a coordinated strike that would allow ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr to seize the imamate unopposed.

Within a month all the pieces – trigger-men and a fatwā blessing the operation – were in place. On February 18, the assassins struck, ambushing Yahyā as he was touring a farm outside of Ṣan‘ā’ in a battered black Ford. Yahyā’s body was riddled with more than 50 bullets and left for dead. More than 150 miles south in Ta’izz, Aḥmad escaped. Within days, as we will see in the next chapter, Aḥmad was able to rally the tribes and defeat what would later be called a “constitutional coup.” In 1948, the imamate wasn’t at stake, only the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty and Aḥmad’s role as imām. The young prince would save both but, like his father’s steady accumulation of political power, this would come at a great cost to his descendants and the imāmate itself.

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This chapter focuses on the assassination of Imām Yaḥyā in February 1948, the attempted coup that followed, and the struggle for the imāmate between Yaḥyā’s son, Aḥmad, and ʿAbdullāh al-Wazīr. The coup, this chapter argues, failed for two reasons, both of which were the result of poor planning and execution by the plotters.\(^1\) First, al-Wazīr’s supporters failed to prepare adequately to take power. They spent a massive amount of time discussing and debating what they would do once they acquired power, but very little on the mechanics of seizing it from the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. The working assumption appears to have been that the assassinations of Yaḥyā and Aḥmad would pave the way for them to seize the imāmate. When that failed the plotters had no viable contingency plan. The second instance of poor planning revolved around al-Wazīr’s battlefield decisions. Once Aḥmad escaped Taʿizz and regrouped in Ḥajjah, al-Wazīr was forced to make a choice. Either he could march out to meet Aḥmad in the north Yemeni highlands, where Aḥmad was strongest, or he could wait for the crown prince to come to him in Ṣanʿāʾ. Al-Wazīr, who had been living in comfortable exile for much of the past decade, elected to split the difference, sending small detachments of troops out against Aḥmad one at a time. This allowed Aḥmad’s forces to dispatch al-Wazīr’s supporters in a piecemeal fashion, without ever being forced to confront the bulk of al-Wazīr’s army at one time.

\(^1\) Other commentators have attributed the failure of the coup to a variety of other mistakes. See, for instance, Aḥmad al-Shāmī, *Riyāḥ al-taghyīr fi l-yaman*, Jiddah: al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿArabiyyah, 1984, pp. 220 – 227, where he lays out seven reasons for the failure of the coup, including the mistaken publication of the Sacred National Charter and the assassination of Yaḥyā. I don’t believe the former was a mistake that directly caused the failure of the coup, as I lay out below, and many of al-Shāmī’s other critiques can be classified under either the two categories of poor planning I lay out or through actions surrounding Aḥmad as we will see shortly.
As much as al-Wazīr lost the imāmate in 1948, Aḥmad did his part to win the office. In particular, three things stand out. First, Aḥmad took advantage of the telegraph, which gave him advanced knowledge of the plot and his father’s assassination in Ṣan‘ā’. This allowed him to escape Ta‘izz before al-Wazīr’s assassins could strike. The second thing that allowed Aḥmad to win the imamate was the betrayal of al-Wazīr by Ḫusayn al-Ḥalālī, the deputy governor of Ḫudaydah. After Aḥmad escaped Ta‘izz he moved west toward the Red Sea coast before turning north. Al-Wazīr’s supporters were waiting for him in Ḫudaydah, but al-Ḥalālī, who portrayed himself as an al-Wazīr backer, sent the crown prince a message to avoid the city, which allowed Aḥmad to escape the trap. The third key to Aḥmad’s defeat of al-Wazīr was his appearance at the front in rallying tribes to his banner. In contrast to al-Wazīr, who was more subdued, Aḥmad had a forceful personality and he used it to his benefit, browbeating the tribes in the north into supporting him against the pretender to the title. Aḥmad’s personal appearance in Ḥajjah also contradicted the rumors that he had been killed in Ta‘izz. By showing himself and by taking up the mantle of the imāmate he was able to rally enough tribal supporters to march on Ṣan‘ā’ and al-Wazīr.

The chapter also discusses the make up and weaknesses of the Free Yemeni Movement, which coalesced around al-Zubayrī and Nu‘mān in Aden. Although these two were the figureheads, over time, the movement became a catch-all for opponents of both the imāmate as well as the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. This chapter also argues that the 1948 coup did two things. First, the fact that there was a coup encouraged Aḥmad to further tighten control over the government as well as consolidate power within his own branch of the family. Instead of working with the modernizers, as factions within the Free Yemeni Movement were often called, Aḥmad broke with them decisively and by doing so ensured that he would not be able to bridge
the gap with them. This made the modernizers and reformers enemies of the imāmate and, in
time, would help speed its downfall. The second issue from 1948 that helped sow the seeds of a
future revolt was the sack of Ṣanʿā’ī. Aḥmad gave his tribal supporters carte blanche to pillage
and plunder the city, as they forced al-Wazīr from the palace. The memory of these bloody few
days in March 1948 did much to turn merchant opinion within the city against Aḥmad and the
Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. At a time when Aḥmad and the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family needed allies and
supporters, Aḥmad alienated two distinct groups: reformers and merchants. As we will see in
chapter three, when he also alienated a powerful tribal family, it would mark the end of his
family’s dynasty. Instead of seeing the coup as a warning to reach out to opposition figures and
share power more broadly, Aḥmad saw it as a reason to consolidate power, convinced that he
couldn’t trust anyone outside of his immediate family.

In 1948 there was, as Paul Dresch has argued, no “general language in which a popular
uprising could be encouraged.”² In some ways the attempted coup was simply a continuation of
imāmic politics as they had always existed. ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr issued a da’wa and accepted the
bay’a, as imāms traditionally did. But within this traditional form, al-Wazīr and the rest of the
Free Yemenis, as they called themselves, imported something new: The Sacred National Charter,
which was to be the founding document of a new and reformed imāmate. Yaḥyā’s nearly four
decades of rule had led to excess and abuse, a centralization of authority and power within the
Ḥamīd al-Dīn family that the reformers wanted to end. The Sacred National Charter would limit
the imām and protect the people from power. One of the problems, of course, was that as a result
of technological advancements Yaḥyā had been able to more fully utilize his considerable
political talents and, in the process, achieved far more control than his predecessors. The Free
Yemenis were also influenced by outside currents of thought, particularly the nationalist and

² Paul Dresch, A History of Modern Yemen, 57.
modernist movements that were rippling just below the surface in Egypt and Iraq. Decades later, on the far side of the revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s, some would refer to 1948 as a revolution, *thawra*. But there is no evidence that anyone involved in the coup ever thought of it as such. It was a specific reaction to a particular set of circumstances. It was both a correction and a recalibration. The Free Yemenis sought to end imāmic injustice – what was termed *ẓulm* – as constituted by, among other things, Yahyā’s insistence on his son as successor. They also wanted to restrain future imāms from acquiring a similar amount of political power, which effectively put them beyond the balancing influence of the broader community of Zaydī scholars. But they did not want to overthrow the entire system. In the 1970s, one Yemeni writer, Muḥammad al-Shahīrī, argued that the events of 1948 were nothing more than “a ‘palace revolution’ of the sort that had always occurred among ‘feudal princes’.”3 Other Yemenis have been more careful, referring to it as *haraka*, or movement.4 The seeds of the 1962 revolution were certainly present, at least in an early form, in the 1948 coup. In fact, both began the same way: with a palace coup. But in 1962, the plotters – some of whom were the same as 14 years earlier – announced a republic, instead of just a new, limited imāmate. By 1962 the feelings and outlook of 1948 had evolved into something new. The coup of 1948 was meant to be a modification and correction of the existing system, the one in 1962 was designed to be a clean break with what had come before.

The failure of the 1948 coup, as was mentioned above, can be traced back to poor planning by the plotters and decisive action by Aḥmad. Fourteen years later, as we will see in chapter four, these two issues would be reversed. Imām al-Badr, who was a weaker, more pliable ruler than his father, would fail to react as aggressively as Aḥmad had in 1948. The

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4 For example the Encyclopedia of Yemen uses this term in its entry on the coup.
plotters of 1962 would be better prepared than those who had failed in 1948 and, more importantly, they would receive quick and public aid from an outside power. Both of these elements – a weak ruler and outside assistance – were missing in 1948. These two issues, of course, are not the only determinants for the failure of ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr’s coup, but they are the key ones.

Along with the impact personalities can have on political outcomes, this chapter also touches on the evolving idea of the imāmate in mid-twentieth-century Yemen. Both Yaḥyā and Aḥmad succeeded their fathers as imām. But they did it in different ways. Yaḥyā became imām through the more traditional avenue of gaining support from ahl al-ḥall wa’l-‘aqd. Aḥmad came to power, in large part, by being designated “crown prince.” Both had to fight for the title, but their victories, while similar in form, differed in meaning. Yaḥyā needed decades of rule and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to install his son as crown prince, Aḥmad needed only to win. The office of the crown prince within the Zaydī imamate, which was never supposed to support nepotism, had become institutionalized. Aḥmad felt it was his right to name his own successor, regardless of qualifications or shortcomings. What mattered was his opinion, not the consensus and support of the ahl al-ḥall wa’l-‘aqd, which now merely acted as a rubber stamp for the imām’s will. These changes in the nature and authority of the imām would have serious consequences for the political-religious office and its ability to survive in a rapidly changing world, as we will see in Parts II and III.

Al-Wazīr’s Coup

On February 17, 1948 Imām Yaḥyā left Ṣan‘ā’ with his prime minister, ‘Abdullāh al-‘Amrī, four grandsons, his aide, a driver, and a single soldier.5 The 79-year-old imām, who

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could no longer walk without assistance, enjoyed fresh air and wanted to tour one of his outlying farms. Nine miles outside of Ṣan‘ā’, Yaḥyā stopped the car and let three of his grandsons – all sons of Ḥasan – out of the car, promising to pick them up on his way back to Ṣan‘ā’. The boys climbed out of the black Ford and watched it disappear down the dusty road. It would be the last time they would see their grandfather.

A few miles farther down the road the car made a second unscheduled stop. A massive boulder was blocking the road. Yemen’s dirt roads were poorly maintained and the few cars in the country often had to proceed with caution, but using stones and rocks as roadblocks was still relatively rare. Pulling off to one side, the driver and soldier climbed out to clear the road. As soon as the two men set down their weapons to push, the ambushers opened fire, killing both in the first volley. After that it was easy. Yaḥyā was too old to fight and his grandson too young. ‘Amrī, the prime minister, was 61-years-old himself, and likely without a weapon. That left only Sayyid Ḥusayn al-Muṭahhar, the imām’s aide, who wasn’t able to do much. The assassins quickly finished off the four in the car. But even after it must have been clear that everyone inside the bullet-riddled vehicle was dead, the men kept firing, repeatedly emptying their rifles into the parked car. When Imām Yaḥyā’s body was recovered later that day he had more than 50 bullet wounds in his body.

The ambush had been planned and led by a tribal dissident from Marib named ‘Alī Nāṣir al-Qarda‘ī, who had a long history with Imām Yaḥyā, which may explain the large number of shots. Almost two decades earlier in 1929, Yaḥyā had imprisoned al-Qarda‘ī in an attempt to bring him and his tribe, the Murād, to heel. Yaḥyā released him four years later only to re-arrest

7 Quoted in Douglas, The Free Yemeni Movement, 139.
him and keep him five more years until the resourceful tribesman managed to escape.\textsuperscript{8} Once al-Qarda‘ī retreated to his tribal territory, Yaḥyā was powerless to re-arrest him, which shows the limits of imāmic authority and reach in the 1930s. Yaḥyā couldn’t simply order troops into areas under Murād’s control. He needed tribal assistance not antagonism, and while Yaḥyā often played one tribe off against another, such as when Aḥmad broke the power of the al-Aḥmar family, the conflict between Yaḥyā and al-Qarda‘ī was seen as a personal issue and as such not a matter meriting tribal conflict. Instead, Yaḥyā sent a message to al-Qarda‘ī asking him to occupy Shabwa, a region in southern Yemen which both Yaḥyā and the British colony in Aden claimed. This did two things simultaneously. First, it allowed al-Qarda‘ī to believe everything had been forgiven and second, it gave the British an excuse to act against al-Qarda‘ī, which allowed Yaḥyā to play two of his enemies off against one another. As Yaḥyā must have known, al-Qarda‘ī’s deliberately provocative action sparked a quick British response as they arrested al-Qarda‘ī. Ten years later, in 1948, the tribesman would have his revenge.

Three hours after their grandfather, Imām Yaḥyā, had dropped them off on the side of the road a shepherd approached the trio of brothers, and told them the shocking news.\textsuperscript{9} Scared and shaken, the brothers raced back to town to tell their family. But in the capital, Yaḥyā’s opponents were already moving to consolidate their gains. Jamāl Jamīl, an Iraqi military officer who was in charge of the city’s security, surrounded Ṣan‘ā’ with 2,800 soldiers and then moved on Qasr al-Sa‘āda where three of Yaḥyā’s sons – Muḥsin, Ḥusayn and Yaḥyā – were living. Jamīl, a thin, dapper man who preferred modern, western dress, had originally been part of a 1942 Iraqi training mission to Yemen. At the end of the mission Imām Yaḥyā offered him a


\textsuperscript{9} Douglas, The Free Yemeni Movement, 139.
position reorganizing the Yemeni army along modern lines. Jamīl, who had enemies at home stemming from his involvement in a 1936 coup in Iraq, accepted the imām’s offer to stay in Yemen. Six years later, Jamīl turned on his benefactor, becoming involved in his second coup in as many countries.

The afternoon of the assassination, the Iraqi transplant went with ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr to Qasr al-Sa‘āda. Together they convinced several members of the ‘ukfa, the imāmic bodyguard, to join the coup. Then, with ‘Abdullāh al-Sallāl, a local military officer, Jamīl confronted the three princes and their own bodyguards. Once again, he tried to negotiate. Al-Wazīr, who under the Sacred National Charter was to be named the new imam, wanted as little killing as possible. It is unlikely that al-Wazīr was worried about a blood feud, given the small size of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, but he likely wanted a seamless, bloodless transition. After all the 1948 movement was attempting to correct what they saw as the historical excesses and injustices (zulm) of Yahyā’s rule. Al-Wazīr likely didn’t want to begin his rule with a massacre. Even al-Qarda‘ī, for all his animosity toward Yahyā, had only agreed to the assassination after receiving a fatwa from Ḥusayn al-Kībsī, a noted religious scholar and sayyid. Al-Wazīr was likely worried that any excessive killing might needlessly fracture his supporters and undermine his rule before he could consolidate power. Like Yahyā in 1904, al-Wazīr wanted to present both his opponents and supporters with a fait accompli, which meant a smooth and quick transition.

Jamīl attempted to accommodate his orders, but in the confusion of the tense negotiations someone’s gun went off – whether by accident or design is unclear – and in the brief exchange of fire that followed Muḥsin and Ḥusayn were killed. Fearing for his own life amidst the firing,

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12 Dresch, A History of Modern Yemen, 56. Indeed, as we saw earlier, Aḥmad al-Shāmī lists the assassination of Yahyā as one of the reasons the coup failed. See: Riyāḥ al-tagḥyīr, 220 – 227.
Yahyā, the youngest of the brothers, threw himself on the ground, shouting out his surrender. Jamīl and his men seized the young prince and marched him through the old city to the Palace of Ghamdān, where they forced him to swear the bay’a, or oath of allegiance, to ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr as the new imām. Al-Wazīr would not officially be named imām until the following day, February 18, when the ‘ulama met immediately after the hurried burial of Imām Yahyā. But that was merely the rubber stamp to a decision that had been made months earlier.

The Free Yemenis were a loose collection of scholars, reformers, dissidents, and soldiers. The motives of each varied, but all were, in some way or another, opposed to Yahyā and the continued rule of the Ḫamīd al-Dīn family. The movement itself, as we have already seen, crystallized around al-Zubayrī and Nu’mān in Aden, after they fled Ḫawmād’s court in 1944. The group wanted to reform and modernize Yemen, moving it closer to the broader trends that would soon lead to coups in Egypt and Iraq while maintaining a local flavor. What this meant in practice, at least in 1948, was a reformed imāmate as opposed to the military coups in Cairo and Baghdad. The figurehead for the Free Yemenis was ‘Abdullah al-Wazīr who returned to Yemen in 1947 after nearly eight years in Cairo. Al-Wazīr was a sayyid, and thus eligible for the imāmate, and he was willing to abide by the terms of the Sacred National Charter, which he had a hand in writing. After Yahyā’s death, al-Wazīr sent a telegram to Aḥmad, expressing his condolences and letting Aḥmad know he would have a position in the new government. The ahl al-hall wa’l-‘aqd have spoken, al-Wazīr wrote in the telegram, and the oaths of allegiance were now being accepted. 

14 For other accounts of the 1948 coup see Thawrah 1948: al-mīlād wa-l-masīrah wa-l-nu’ aththirāt, Ṣan‘ā’: Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-l-Buḥūth al-Yamanī; Beirut, Dār al-‘Awda, 1982.
15 For the text of al-Wazīr’s telegram see Dresch, Modern Yemen, 57.
One of the reasons Imām Yaḥyā had been willing to break with Zaydī custom and compel so many of “those who loose and bind” to swear their support to Aḥmad as crown prince years earlier was precisely because of the power of these pledges. To break a pledge of bay’a in mid-twentieth century Yemen was to lose honor and face, what was known locally as jāḥ: dignity and standing, the twin corner stones of the moral order of society. Paradoxically, it was this shared idea of oaths and honor that necessitated the assassination of Aḥmad as well as Yaḥyā. Like most prominent scholars and shaykhs, ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr had pledged his allegiance to Aḥmad. But if the crown prince were to die or somehow be killed, the oaths would be invalidated and they would be free to support someone else or even, in some cases, put themselves forward. In a sense it was less dishonorable to have Aḥmad killed than it would have been to break their word.

Al-Wazīr’s attempt to invalidate the oaths to Aḥmad while simultaneously preserving honor was partly foiled by the three grandsons Yaḥyā had left on the side of the road. After hearing the shepherd’s tale they rushed back to Ṣan‘ā’ and told their uncle Qāsim. As Minister of Communications, Qāsim had a radio in his house and he immediately sent a message to Aḥmad in Ta‘izz informing him of their father’s assassination. Aḥmad, who had been preparing to travel to Ṣan‘ā’ to take charge of the investigation into the leaked assassination plot from January, which we discussed in chapter one, immediately realized what this meant and, along with a small group of supporters, he fled Ta‘izz. Aḥmad’s quick reaction likely saved his life. He knew about his father’s death before the Ta‘izz assassins, who were reportedly led by

16 See for instance, the good discussion in Dresch, Tribes and Government, on honor (sharaf), as well as Najwa Adra, Tribal Mediation in Yemen and its Implications to Development, AAS Working Papers in Social Anthropology, 2011.
17 Aḥmad, of course, would have likely attempted to avenge his father regardless of whether or not he had received the bay’a. But for the plotters, particularly those like al-Wazīr who wished to adhere, as much as possible, to the tenants of Zaydism their pledged dictated their actions.
18 Their father Ḥasan was north of Ṣan‘ā’ in Ḥāshid territory with Shaykh Ḥusayn al-ʿAḥmar at the time of the assassination.
Shaykh Ḥasan ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Shāyif of Bakīl. Aḥmad’s small convoy of 20 trucks left Ta’izz carrying the chests of gold and bags of money that he knew he would need to rally tribal support. Instead of moving north toward Ṣan‘ā’ and engaging in an immediate confrontation with Wazīr, the 54-year-old crown prince elected to travel west into Tihama and only then turn north, moving along the Red Sea coast. This was the sort of tactical wisdom that, as we shall see, al-Wazīr later lacked in his own decision about how and when to engage his rival. Aḥmad’s initial plan was to outflank al-Wazīr. He would travel to Ḥudayda, along the same route he had pacified years earlier as a prince, gaining support and tribal backers on the way and from there march on Ṣan‘ā’ hopefully before al-Wazīr could issue his da‘wa, declaring himself imām. Aḥmad was well aware of the struggle his father had in succeeding his grandfather more than four decades earlier, the last time an imām had died, and he knew that declaring first often gave one a distinct advantage in becoming the imām.

In the chaotic hours after his father’s death, Aḥmad didn’t know which of the ahl al-hall wa‘l-‘aqd would abide by their earlier pledges to support his candidacy. Pre-approval of an incumbent’s successor and having a crown prince were unprecedented steps in Yemen, and Aḥmad had no idea if they would hold up following his father’s assassination. Al-Wazīr’s backers had plotted to kill him once, and they would likely keep trying. In Ṣan‘ā’, al-Wazīr must have wrestled with many of the same thoughts. Like Aḥmad, he knew what it would mean to fail, and he knew the importance of being first, which provided an advantage in acquiring supporters. On February 18, shortly after burying Yaḥyā, al-Wazīr issued his da‘wa. The 59-year-old took for himself the title al-Hadī ilā al-Haqq, a clear reference to Yemen’s first imām and an attempt by someone who was, in one sense, a usurper, to cast himself as part of an

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unbroken line of imāms stretching back more than a millennium.\textsuperscript{21} But for all the nods to the past – along with issuing the *daʿwa*, Wazīr accepted the *bayʿa* just as imāms had always done – the plotters were attempting to establish a new form of rule whose principles were laid out in a document. They called it the Sacred National Charter, *al-mīthāq al-waṭanī al-muqaddas*, and at its heart it stressed rule by consultation and constitution.\textsuperscript{22} Many of the plotters had spent time abroad, particularly in Egypt and Iraq where they were impressed by both the technological and intellectual development they saw abroad, only to return home and be disappointed by how far behind Yemen lagged in both areas. The Sacred National Charter was their attempt to do two things at once. First, it would remove Imām Yaḥyā and the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty, which they saw as a source of injustice, or *zulm*. Second, it would put Yemen on a path toward the type of development they saw in countries like Iraq and Egypt. Government would be based on a document, albeit a Yemeni one. It would become less personalized and, they hoped, less prone to abuse by unjust rulers. In this, the Zaydī elite among the plotters, who had been isolated from political powers since 1937, were taking a small but significant step away from the traditions of the past and how the imāmate had been structured. In time, this willingness to compromise long-held traditions for short-term political gain would prove a telling precedent. This wasn’t a complete break with the past, but it was a step in a new direction. The imāmate would still exist, but in such an altered state as to be unrecognizable to centuries of previous imāms and scholars.

The drafters of the document left little doubt as to their frustrations. The first line opens: “Whereas conditions in Yemen have been extremely backward in both temporal and spiritual respects owing to the despotism and selfishness for which the present Imām Yaḥyā ibn

\textsuperscript{22} For a brief discussion on this see Dresch, *Tribes and Government*, 238.
Muḥammad Ḥamīd al-Dīn has been renowned.”

As the news of Imām Yahyā’s assassination and al-Wazīr’s daʿwa leaked out of Ṣanʿāʾ and into the northern highlands, tribal shaykhs and rural scholars had a choice. Both Aḥmad and al-Wazīr were looking for allies. Al-Wazīr had already declared and Aḥmad likely would do so soon, and both had money to reward their supporters-- Aḥmad in the chests of gold his trucks moved north, and Wazīr in the treasury, bayt al-māl, that he now controlled in Ṣanʿāʾ.

One of the men in Wazīr’s inner circle was Qaḍī Ḥusayn al-Ḥalālī, the deputy governor of Ḥudaydah, who had grown close to the al-Wazīr family during his time as a judge in Taʿizz two decades earlier when the al-Wazīrs controlled much of lower Yemen. As soon as ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr heard that Aḥmad was moving toward Ḥudaydah, he telegraphed al-Ḥalālī with orders to arrest the crown prince. Officially, Yahyā’s seventh and favorite son, ‘Abdullāh, was the governor of Ḥudayda, but over time he had become more of a figurehead, leaving the governing to his deputy.24 Sharp-minded yet mild-mannered, ‘Abdullāh bin Yahyā also had, in the words of British political agent Harold Ingrams, a weak character and a love for money that made him “unpopular.”25 When he was absent, as he often was, the daily operations fell to al-Ḥalālī. That was exactly what al-Wazīr was counting on when he sent a telegram to al-Ḥalālī on February 18, ordering him to arrest Aḥmad before the crown prince could reach Ḥudaydah.26 Al-Wazīr had already coerced the oath of allegiance from one of Yahyā’s sons and another, ‘Abdullāh’s full brother Ibrāhīm, had been secretly backing the rebels for months.27 If al-Ḥalālī could seize Aḥmad, the coup would be complete, the rest of the Ḥamīd al-Dīns would be rounded up, and the

27 For more on Ibrāhīm’s relationship with al-Wazīr see below.
tribes would fall in line. But at this key juncture, when Aḥmad was harried and on the run, al-Ḥalālī betrayed his old friend and gave Aḥmad the chance he needed to regroup. In the bitter words of one of the al-Wazīrs writing years after the fact, al-Ḥalālī acted as though he was “with the reformers as one of them while in reality he was with the crown prince.” Instead of arresting Aḥmad, the 52-year-old deputy governor warned him not to enter Ḥudaydah, which was teeming with al-Wazīr’s supporters. “Go to Bājil,” al-Ḥalālī advised in a message, naming a “safe” village 27 miles northeast of Ḥudaydah. Relying on al-Ḥalālī’s intimate knowledge of al-Wazīr’s plan, Aḥmad did just that, bypassing Ḥudaydah for Bājil, where he issued his own da‘wa, taking for himself the honorific Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh, the Victor for God’s religion.

It is unclear exactly why al-Ḥalālī chose to betray al-Wazīr at that crucial moment. Perhaps it was greed and the promise of Aḥmad’s gold, maybe it was just a clear-eyed assessment of who was likely to win the imāmate, or even the fact that Aḥmad was present and Wazīr was not. The sources are silent, but while al-Ḥalālī’s decision didn’t secure the imāmate for Aḥmad, it did prevent al-Wazīr from destroying his rival at a vulnerable moment.

Al-Ḥalālī completed his betrayal by wiring al-Wazīr that Aḥmad was still somewhere in the coastal deserts of the Tihama, south of Ḥudaydah. In reality, Aḥmad was already on his way to Ḥajjah, a family stronghold that he had once ruled as governor. This was where Aḥmad felt the most comfortable and where he had the most support. As always in Yemen when the Zaydī imāms felt threatened, they retreated north into the highlands and the tribes that had

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28 Wazīr, Hayāt al-amīr, 448.
29 For more on al-Ḥalālī’s role see Aḥmad Dāghīr, al-Yaman taḥt ḥukm imām aḥmad, Cairo: Maktabat al-Madbūlī, 2005, 204.
30 Wazīr, Hayāt al-amīr, 448.
31 Years later Aḥmad would appoint al-Ḥalālī the head of his Diwān, a prestigious and lucrative position. But whether this was promised at the time of al-Ḥalālī’s betrayal or simply was an imāmic recompense for services rendered is not clear.
32 al-Wazīr, Hayāt al-amīr, 448.
backed them for centuries.  

Al-Ḥalālī waited until Aḥmad was well on his way to Ḥajjah before sending an update to al-Wazīr in Ṣanʿā’. Aḥmad, the deputy governor wrote, is much stronger than we anticipated and “should not be underestimated.”

Al-Ḥalālī also broke the news that Aḥmad had eluded him and was on his way to Ḥajjah. Still relying on al-Ḥalālī, whom he had no reason to doubt, al-Wazīr knew exactly what this meant. If Aḥmad could reach Ḥajjah he could raise an army and meet al-Wazīr on equal terms; all the momentum and advantages of declaring first would be lost. Al-Wazīr ordered troops north to cut Aḥmad off, but al-Ḥalālī’s delay meant that they never had a chance. Aḥmad was already ensconced in Ḥajjah, drumming up support for an attack on Ṣanʿā’. By moving first west toward the Red Sea coast and then north into the Yemeni highlands, Aḥmad had managed to bypass both Ḥudaydah and Ṣanʿā’, where al-Wazīr was strongest. In so doing he had managed to appear in person in front of his followers at a time when there were still rumors that Aḥmad himself had been killed. It is difficult to overestimate the impact this had on the tribes in and around Ḥajjah. In sum, three things contributed to Aḥmad being able to challenge al-Wazīr. First, he received the telegram from Ṣanʿā’ that allowed him to escape ahead of the assassins. Second, al-Ḥalālī’s betrayal of al-Wazīr saved him from near-certain arrest in Ḥudaydah. Finally, his own actions, particularly his personal presence, were key in rallying the tribes in and around Ḥajjah. That city would be Aḥmad’s base as he prepared to move against al-Wazīr and reclaim the imāmate for himself.

Interestingly, in 1948, both Aḥmad and al-Wazīr felt the need to appeal to two distinct audiences, a domestic one and an international one. Like every imām before them, each man needed the support of Yemen’s tribes in order to seize the imāmate. But in a break with the past, they also recognized the need for international support. This was particularly true with regard to

33 As we will see, this is the same strategy that Aḥmad’s son, Muḥammad al-Badr, fell back on when he was challenged by a coup in 1962.
34 al-Wazīr, Ḥayāt al-amīr, 448.
the Arab League and Saudi Arabia. Shortly after announcing his *da‘wa*, al-Wazîr sent a three-man delegation to Riyadh to petition King Ḥabīl b. Ṭalâ‘ah Al Sa‘ūd (aka Ibn Saud) to recognize him as the true imām. Aḥmad sent a similar delegation to Saudi Arabia from Bājil. Each also appealed to the Arab League for recognition, hoping that once one recognized them the other would fall in line.

Al-Wazîr had the tougher task of maneuvering between the two audiences. He was the usurper and Aḥmad was the crown prince and recognized heir. Even though hereditary succession was controversial in Yemen, it was recognized internationally. Eighteen months earlier al-Wazîr had met with Ibn Saud while on the Ḥajj and came away with what he believed was Saudi support for his claim to the imāmate. But now when he needed the Saudi king’s backing, Ibn Saud was frustratingly silent. Part of the problem was the assassination. Neither Ibn Saud, a king himself, nor the Arab League, which had several monarchies as member states, wanted to be seen as endorsing regicide. There was also the issue of Aḥmad’s competing claim. When the crown prince’s delegation arrived in Riyadh and his telegrams in Cairo both Ibn Saud and the Arab League elected to take a cautious approach. The imāmate would be decided, as it always had been, on the field of battle.

**Contesting the Imāmate**

Almost immediately after issuing his *da‘wa* ʿAbdullâh al-Wazîr found himself in a difficult position. Tribesmen from around Ṣan‘ā’ flocked to the city to petition the new imām for favors and solutions to long-standing grievances. With a new imām unresolved issues might finally be settled, new favorites might be established and financial favors forthcoming. As often happened in an imāmic contest, with the exception of the Free Yemeni true believers, various actors wanted to gauge the value of their support to al-Wazîr as opposed to Aḥmad, much as al-
Halâlî had done in Ḥudaydah. J. Leigh Douglas correctly points out that these tribesmen could not be considered as being “with Aḥmad,” and yet even so their presence in Ṣanʿā’ must have put an extra burden on the fledgling regime, which in turn helped the crown prince.\(^{35}\) Yaḥyā had been imām for 44 years and the relationships that he had built and developed could not be appropriated and co-opted easily by al-Wazīr, particularly since Yaḥyā’s heir and designated successor was still alive and gathering an army in the north. Stuck in Ṣanʿā’ listening to intelligence reports and rumors of Aḥmad’s movements around Ḥajjah, including al-Ḥalâlî’s warning not to underestimate the crown prince, al-Wazīr had a decision to make. He could either march out to meet Aḥmad or wait for the crown prince to come to him. Both options had potential drawbacks. If al-Wazīr sent his troops north they would be fighting in Aḥmad’s territory, in the northern highlands where the crown prince had the backing of many of the tribes. But if al-Wazīr waited in Ṣanʿā’, Aḥmad would be able to pick the time of the fight. The longer al-Wazīr waited the stronger Aḥmad’s army was likely to become, as he attracted more supporters and promised them a payoff in Ṣanʿā’. In this, as in much else, support had its own logic, as tribes sought to join the winning side – the more supporters Aḥmad acquired the more he was able to attract. Waiting only worked for al-Wazīr if he could use the time to shore up international support or gain local allies. But with both Saudi Arabia and the Arab League seemingly reluctant to take sides and with Aḥmad reportedly adding tribesmen to his cause at a rapid clip in the northern highlands, al-Wazīr felt as though he had to move to have a chance. How much of these reports were based on al-Ḥalâlî’s false telegrammed reports is unclear, but the disinformation clearly had an impact. Al-Wazīr ordered his nephew, Muḥammad bin Muḥammad al-Wazīr, to march north to Shibām Kawkabān, a key point on the road to Ṣanʿā’.

\(^{35}\) Dougals, *The Free Yemeni Movement*, 142.
with roughly 400 tribesmen from Nihm. By doing so he was sending his supporters into the heart of Ḥamīd al-Dīn territory. Decades earlier, the al-Wazīrs had been responsible for pacifying much of Lower Yemen; the family had much less experience and a more limited network of contacts in the northern highlands. But that is where al-Wazīr had decided to make his stand and fight for the imāmate.

In Ḥajjah, Aḥmad was rallying tribesmen to his cause, but not as quickly or as many as al-Wazīr feared 75 miles south in Ṣan‘ā’. Shortly after arriving in Ḥajjah on February 25, more than a week after his father’s assassination, Aḥmad sent letters to several tribes calling on them to avenge the death of their imām. Implicit in the call to arms was that these tribes would offer the bay’a to Aḥmad and they would also be free to plunder as much as they could carry from Ṣan‘ā’. Several of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes closed ranks around their elder brother, most notably Ḩasan who was already in the north rallying support in ‘Amrān. Like al-Wazīr, Aḥmad knew that the imām with the most men usually won, and he was willing to do whatever it took to add to his tally. Nearly half a century earlier, his father had relied on Nāṣir bin Mabkhūt to solidify his claim to the imāmate, and now Yaḥyā’s eldest son turned to Nāṣir’s eldest son, Ḥusayn bin Nāṣir, for a similar show of support. But where Yaḥyā had been patient, Aḥmad was impulsive. Worried that Ḥusayn might throw his support and that of the Ḥashid tribal confederation behind al-Wazīr in retaliation for the fighting two decades earlier – when as a young prince, Aḥmad had nearly destroyed the family as we saw in chapter one – Aḥmad seized Ḥusayn’s eldest son, Ḥamīd, as a hostage. The traditional tactic was just one of the moves Aḥmad tried in late February and early March 1948. He promised riches and plunder to some, paid off or threatened others, and cobbled the various tribes into a loose but powerful alliance.

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37 al-Aḥmar, Muṣḥahkirāt, 43.
38 al-Aḥmar, Muṣḥahkirāt, 43.
Curiously, for the two men who claimed to be imām – traditionally known as “men of the pen and the sword” – neither led their troops into battle during this period. Both stayed well back from the frontlines, directing movements and making decisions from their bases in Ḥajjah and Ṣan‘ā’, respectively. Part of this can be explained by their relatively advanced age. It had been 14 years since Aḥmad led the unsuccessful campaign against Ibn Saud to reclaim Jizan and ‘Aṣīr. At 54-years-old he was overweight and in no shape to spend a day on horseback. Wazīr was five years older and had less battlefield experience than Aḥmad, but he too was in poor fighting shape. He had spent much of the previous decade in the relative comfort of Cairo and was far removed from his time campaigning in the Tihama and Lower Yemen. Both had experience in battle, but neither would directly participate in the fight for the imāmate.

In retrospect it is clear that, as Manfred Wenner argues, “when Aḥmad arrived in Ḥajjah the fate of the ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr coup was sealed.” But in the chaos of the moment neither side had the advantage of hindsight. Still, from the beginning Aḥmad had the upper-hand militarily. Al-Wazīr’s first foray, led by Muḥammad al-Wazīr and his nearly 400 Nihm tribesmen, was handily defeated at Shibām-Kawkabān, just 26 miles west of Ṣan‘ā’, by a coalition of tribesmen coming south from ‘Amrān. Muḥammad al-Wazīr was captured and taken to Ḥajjah, where he remained a prisoner for the rest of the brief war, while most of the Nihm tribesmen deserted to Aḥmad’s cause when it became clear the battle was going against them. Frustrated by this initial defeat, al-Wazīr doubled-down on his failed strategy of fighting Aḥmad in the highlands by sending another nephew Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Wazīr with troops

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39 Aḥmad, of course, had led troops previously both against Ibn Saud in 1934 as well as domestically in his 20s, but that was as a prince, or deputy.
40 Wenner, Modern Yemen, 102.
41 Quoted in Najī, al-Tarīkh al-‘Askarī, 183.
42 This is one more example of tribesmen looking out for themselves and putting themselves in the best position for the post-war fallout. The tribes were not simply mercenaries, but neither were they firm ideological believers in al-Wazīr’s cause. This same issue of wartime defections and tribal back-and-forth would also be an issue, as we will see, in the 1962-70 civil war.
from the regular army north toward ‘Amrān. Once again al-Wazīr’s forces were easily defeated and more soldiers deserted to Aḥmad’s side with promises of gold. Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī managed to avoid the fate of his cousin, escaping back to Ṣanʿāʾ in a car full of wounded soldiers.43 Along with news of this latest defeat came a disheartening report from Qāsim al-‘Īzzī, a respected Zaydī scholar, whom al-Wazīr had dispatched north as an emissary to the tribes. ‘Īzzī informed al-Wazīr that the crown prince was in a strong position.44 He noted that the tribes support him, and his brothers are massing to march on Ṣanʿā’. Al-Wazīr was having other problems as well. The Arḥab tribe, based just north of Ṣanʿā’, refused to allow al-Wazīr to send any money or weapons through their territory. The tribe said they would deal with the imām in Ṣanʿā’ only after Yaḥyā’s assassins were brought to justice.45 It is unclear whether this was anything other than a convenient cover from a tribe who wanted to see which way the political winds were blowing before committing itself. But it was yet one more thing that al-Wazīr had not anticipated. As J. Leigh Douglas points out: “in Zaydi politics assassination was a perfectly ‘acceptable’ means of removing one imām to make way for another.”46 Traditionally this claim held true, but it was one thing to assassinate a healthy imām in the prime of his life and something else to kill a 79-year-old man who couldn’t walk without help. Even al-Wazīr had seemed uncomfortable with killing someone as old and feeble as Yaḥyā. Others like Aḥmad al-Shāmī, as we have already seen, attributed the failure of the coup, at least in part, to the decision to assassinate Yaḥyā. The initial reports out of Ṣanʿā’, which were sent both to the tribes and to the Arab League in Cairo, suggested that Yaḥyā had died of a “heart attack,” underscoring the

43 Quoted in Najī, al-Tārīkh al-‘Askarī, 183.
44 Wazīr, Hayāṭ al-amīr, 460.
45 Quoted in Najī, Taḥrīkh al-‘Askarī, 184.
religious and cultural sensitivity of the matter. An excuse or not, Arḥab’s refusal to allow transit further weakened al-Wazīr and prevented him from shoring up tribal support when he needed it the most. The poor planning that had nearly led to the discovery of the plotters in January 1948 was still hobbling them weeks later. The Free Yemenis had put years of thought into what they would do when they acquired power – what the state would look like and how they would resolve issues – but very little into how they would take power. That poor planning eventually prevented them from implementing their project and the Sacred National Charter.

In early March, Ibrāhīm Ḥamīd al-Dīn, Yaḥyā’s only son to side with his father’s assassins, flew to Ṣan‘ā’ from Aden where he had been living in exile for much of the past two years. In an attempt to divide the Ḥamīd al-Dīn brothers who had closed ranks around Aḥmad, al-Wazīr named Ibrāhīm prime minister in his new government. Born in 1916, the ninth of Yahyā’s 14 sons, Ibrāhīm had never been his father’s favorite and indeed had spent much of his twenties in prison on his father’s orders. In October 1946, shortly after one of his periodic releases, he fled to British-ruled Aden to join al-Zubayrī, Nu‘mān, and the rest of the Yemeni exiles, who were congregating just beyond Yahyā’s reach in the southern port city. The move, which took him first to Asmara and Addis Ababa, seems to have been sparked by rumors that Yahyā had suffered a stroke and would likely die. British officials, who warily allowed the exiles to set up shop in Aden, quickly concluded that Ibrāhīm’s request for medical treatment was nothing more than a convenient excuse and speculated that his escape had more to do with palace politics than anything else.

47 Wenner, Modern Yemen, 103 n. 46.
49 Wazīr, Hayāt al-amīr, 461.
50 Douglas, The Free Yemeni Movement, 93. In May 1946, a US Navy medical team examined Yahyā and concluded that he had only “months to live.”
51 Quoted in Douglas, The Free Yemeni Movement, 92.
Ibrāhīm wanted the imāmate for himself, as British political officers believed, he would need to build up support among his brother’s opponents outside the country. But Ibrāhīm had made his move too early. Yaḥyā didn’t die in late 1946, and as a result Ibrāhīm was stuck in Aden for the next 15 months, cut off from developments at home and unable to build a following. Only after his father was assassinated in 1948 was Ibrāhīm able to return to Ṣanʿā’. But instead of coming back as an imām in his own right, as he had hoped, Ibrahīm came back in support of al-Wazīr’s daʿwa.

After so much time away, Ibrāhīm’s return to Ṣanʿā’ in March 1948 had little discernible impact. His brothers, even his full ones like ‘Abdullāh and Ismāʿīl whom he believed would support him, all sided with Aḥmad. By this time, the tribes from around Ḥajjah were steadily moving toward Ṣanʿā’, slowly tightening the noose around the city. One of the drawbacks of al-Wazīr’s decision to send so many of his troops and tribal supporters north to fight Aḥmad was that they could be defeated in sections; Aḥmad never had to face the full brunt of al-Wazīr’s collected forces. Instead, he faced them one group at a time. When another column of soldiers loyal to al-Wazīr was defeated by tribesmen from ‘Ans in early March it became clear that the coup was nearly at an end. Al-Wazīr and others, who were too deeply implicated to switch sides, retreated to the Ghamdān palace at the foot of Mount Nuqum on the eastern edge of the old city. Outside the city walls, tribesmen loyal to Aḥmad were already starting to appear. On March 13, twenty-four days after Imām Yaḥyā had been gunned down, Aḥmad’s men had surrounded Ṣanʿā’

The Sack of Ṣanʿā’

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52 Despite the increasing technological advances in communication, there were still challenges in communicating between Ṣanʿā’ and Aden. When he was in the south, Ibrahīm was cut-off from events in Ṣanʿā’, and out of sight he was out of mind for many he hoped might one day support him.
Shortly after ‘Abbās al-Wazīr stood up from his evening or ‘ishā’ prayers on Saturday March 13, he noticed some “strange movements” at a palace across town. The first of Aḥmad’s tribes had breached the city walls. Whatever hopes the al-Wazīr family had of city residents putting up a strong defense were dashed. At six of Ṣan‘ā’s seven gates townspeople simply opened the doors to Aḥmad’s raiders apparently under the mistaken impression that this might save them and their city. Only at Bāb al-Baqla, in the Jewish quarter of al-Qā‘, did the tribes have to fight their way in, everywhere else they found the gates thrown open. The tribes that had been moving south under the command of two of Aḥmad’s younger brothers, Ḥasan and ‘Abbās, were soon joined by hundreds of other fighters who had descended on the city, drawn by promises of plunder and loot. Back in Ḥajjah, where he remained throughout the siege, Aḥmad had given his supporters free reign. Wielding swords and guns, the tribesmen flooded into the old city looking for members of the al-Wazīr family and screaming for the heads of the turban-wearers, who they considered guilty by association. One writer, Aḥmad al-Shamī who was in Ṣan‘ā’ at the time, estimates that nearly 250,000 tribesmen entered the city over the course of the next few days. That is almost certainly an exaggeration. At the time, Ṣan‘ā’ had a population of close to 50,000 and northern Yemen less than 4 million. But whatever the number of tribesmen, they were easily able to overpower Ṣan‘ā’. What was left of al-Wazīr’s army didn’t put up much of a fight. Aḥmad’s men quickly cut the telephone lines between Ghamdān palace and Jamāl Jamīl, the Iraqi co-conspirator, at his headquarters across town. Once they had isolated al-Wazīr from his military commander, the tribesmen and soldiers loyal to Aḥmad, some

53 Wazīr, Hayāt al-amīr, 468.
54 The turban wearers were the “learned” men who had organized the coup and, if they remained in Ṣan‘ā’, supported al-Wazīr. Dresch, Modern Yemen, 57.
55 Quoted in Najī, Tarikh al-‘Askarī, 186.
56 One of those young men entering the city on March 14 with the gun his father had given him slung over his shoulder was a 15-year-old named ‘Abdullāh bin Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar who, as we shall see, would soon play an important role in Yemen’s next coup.
57 Quoted in Najī, Tarikh al-‘Askarī, 186.
of whom had hastily changed sides just prior to the siege, opened fire with heavy artillery. The residents who lived through the fighting of those first few days and nights later spoke of confusion and chaos.\textsuperscript{58} It was less a battle than a crime scene without frontline or structure. Tribesmen crashed through doors and broke into shops, stealing whatever they could. Several of Ṣanʿāʾ’s merchants and wealthy families kept a portion of their wealth and money in the Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan Caravansary in the old city. That was one of the first places hit. Armed men, some of whom knew the city well from frequent visits, plundered the caravansary, making off with all of the money and then setting the caravansary on fire as they left. The fire would burn for three days.\textsuperscript{59}

Ḥasan, the eldest member of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family present and his brother’s representative in Ṣanʿāʾ, made little effort to control the men he had unleashed upon the city. It is unlikely that he could have reigned them in even if he had wanted to, although the people of Ṣanʿāʾ would remember and hold against him his unwillingness to try to do so. The sack of Ṣanʿāʾ would be remembered for years and did much to foster animosity and hatred toward Aḥmad and the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. In many ways, the destruction of the city over several days in 1948 also sowed the seeds of future rebellions. Instead of offering an olive branch to the citizens of Ṣanʿāʾ, Aḥmad was eager to reward the tribes that had helped him seize the imāmate.

At the start of the siege, al-Wazīr had sent some of his relatives along with Nāṣir al-Qardaʿī and a handful of tribesmen to the citadel at the top of Mount Nuqum, the steep, rocky mountain on the eastern edge of the city.\textsuperscript{60} If he needed to, that is where he would make his last stand. Now, cut off from his military commander and watching the city he had ruled for the past three weeks fall around him, the 59-year-old commander abandoned his palace for the mountain.

\textsuperscript{58} See the descriptions and stories in Wazīr, Ḥayāt al-amīr, 468 – 470.
\textsuperscript{59} Wazīr, Ḥayāt al-amīr, 470.
\textsuperscript{60} Wazīr, Ḥayāt al-amīr, 467.
Across the city, the rest of his family and many in his inner circle came to a similar conclusion. The city walls, which they had thought would protect them and keep Aḥmad’s tribesmen at bay, were now a prison, trapping them inside. ‘Abdullāh al-Wazīr was rounded up and shackle as was Jamāl Jamīl and most of the rest of the remaining plotters, including Aḥmad’s brother Ibrāhīm, who was going by the title Sayf al-Haqq, the Sword of Truth. On March 15, almost one month to the day after they had declared their support for al-Wazīr as imām, the ‘ulama of Ṣan‘ā’ reversed course and, in the middle of the fighting, named Aḥmad the true and rightful imām.

But still the fighting continued, a sacking that was intended to send a message that would not be forgotten. Whatever discipline and coordination had existed in the tribal ranks prior to the siege quickly broke down. Shāmī, the writer who witnessed much of this firsthand, later wrote that the tribal fighters “had no goal other than looting.” And that is exactly what they did for much of the next three weeks. Houses were stripped of anything that could be carted off and shipped north, money was stolen and weapons seized. Even years later one could still find rugs in the city’s market that had been gashed through with swords.

Aḥmad’s Retribution

Seventy-five miles north of the burning city in his mountaintop castle above Ḥajjah, Aḥmad set up a court to try the prisoners that were trickling into his prisons in “accordance with Islamic principles and the Qur’an.” Aḥmad separated Jamāl Jamīl out from the rest of the prisoners he had locked up, and led the Iraqi exile to believe that his cooperation might be enough to save his life. The document Jamīl wrote, known as his “Confessions,” formed the

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61 This as opposed to his brothers, Yahyā’s other sons, who used the title: sayf al-Islam.
62 Wenner, Modern Yemen, 104.
63 Quoted in Najī, Tarikh al-‘Askarī, 186
64 Mackintosh-Smith, Yemen: The Unknown Arabia,
basis for much of the evidence that was presented against the plotters. Despite later, post-revolutionary caricatures of Aḥmad as a mad tyrant with a vicious temper who made decisions on a whim, following the attempted coup in 1948 he genuinely appeared to want to know what role each man had played. Part of this may have simply been the political reality of the situation. The 120 prisoners Aḥmad had in Ḥajjah represented the elite of Yemeni society. They were the scholars and civil servants that any ruler would require to manage a country. Aḥmad couldn’t simply kill them all and hope to maintain anything resembling a functioning bureaucracy. Clearly, he needed to make an example of some and demonstrate definitively that he could not be challenged and that there would be a price to pay for regicide and rebellion. But knowing where to draw the line and whom to execute were the questions Aḥmad wrestled with in early April 1948.

On April 8, Aḥmad made his first decision. He couldn’t execute the man who killed his father. Shortly after, slipping through the tribal lines around Nuqum, Qarda‘ī and the other six tribesmen from Murad were discovered in Khawlān just east of Ṣan‘ā’ and summarily executed and then beheaded. But he could kill the man who had dared to challenge him for the imāmate. Brushing aside an offer by King ʻAbdullāh of Transjordan to accept ʻAbdullāh al-Wazīr as a political refugee, Aḥmad ordered his execution. Al-Wazīr’s head was then packed up and shipped off to Ṣan‘ā’, where it was shown to Imām Yaḥyā’s womenfolk before being placed atop Bāb al-Yaman along with Qarda‘ī’s severed head as a warning to other would-be revolutionaries. Over the next several days 34 more men were called out of their cells in twos and threes to be

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68 For instance Sinān Abū Lahūm was one of those arrested and sent to Hajjah after al-Wazīr’s coup was put down. For a partial list of those in prison with Abū Lahūm see, Sinān Abū Lahūm, al-Yaman, vol. 1, 1943 – 1962, Ṣan‘ā’: al-ʻAffī, 2003, pp. 59 – 60.
69 Wazīr, Hayāt al-amīr, 505.
executed. Among those spared the sword was ‘Abdullāh al-Sallāl, the military officer who had helped Jamīl on the day of the coup, and Aḥmad Nu’mān, whom Aḥmad determined had not known of the plot to kill his father.\textsuperscript{70} Both would go on to play important roles in Yemen’s next coup, as we will see in chapter four.

In June, Aḥmad’s younger brother Ibrāhīm, who had fled the country two years earlier feigning poor health before joining the plotters in exile, was found in his cell dead of a mysterious illness. Some reports suggested a heart attack, but most believed that Aḥmad had poisoned him.\textsuperscript{71} Even Jamāl Jamīl, the Iraqi military officer whose “Confessions” had supplied so much information on the coup, failed to survive the purge. After more than a year in prison, Aḥmad ordered his execution in August 1949.\textsuperscript{72}

As bloody as the post-coup score settling was Aḥmad may not have been severe enough. The scholars and intellectuals whom he spared, releasing them in bunches over the coming years, would frustrate him for years before eventually launching yet another coup in 1962. Aḥmad was fortunate to escape assassination in Ta‘izz as well as arrest in Hudaydah, when one of al-Wazīr’s allies double-crossed him. But he was also able to take advantage of his good fortune, regroup, and eventually defeat al-Wazīr. In colloquial terms, Aḥmad needed both luck and talent. Neither one was, on its own, sufficient. Nearly a decade-and-a-half later, as we will see, his son lacked the same political skill that made both Yaḥyā and Aḥmad such formidable opponents.

At the same time, his son’s political rivals had also learned from the events of 1948 and al-Wazīr’s failure. When they tried again, as they would in 1962, the revolution wouldn’t be done by half-measure. They wouldn’t seek simply to reform and recalibrate the imāmate, rather they would seek to abolish it. And instead of Yaḥyā or Aḥmad standing in their way, they would

\textsuperscript{70} Douglas, \textit{The Free Yemeni Movement}, 156 – 157 n. 150.
\textsuperscript{71} Ingrams, \textit{The Yemen}, 76; and Douglas, \textit{The Free Yemeni Movement}, 156 – 157 n. 150.
\textsuperscript{72} Following the 1962 Revolution, Jamīl would be posthumously made a “martyr” for the Republic.
find only a young prince who had long sympathized with their goals of political reform. On two levels, then, the coup of 1948 led to the revolution of 1962. Its failure pushed the reformers toward more radical measures, and the fact that it had been attempted at all ensured that Aḥmad kept a tight grip on political power, neglecting to delegate to other sayyids or, even in many cases, his own brothers. If Yaḥyā centralized power within the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, Aḥmad made sure it stayed in his direct line, excluding even his own brothers and nephews.
This chapter focuses on the events of Imām Aḥmad’s 14-year reign from 1948 – 1962.

One of the reasons for this is to build on the arguments introduced in chapter two, which illustrated how the coup in 1948 differed from the one in 1962. In 1948, the plotters wanted to reform the imamate but by 1962 their goals had changed. No longer were they simply looking to reform and modernize the system, now they wanted to abolish it and create something new. Instead of a constitutional imāmate, they wanted to establish a republic, which they succeed to do. This chapter argues that there are three major reasons for this evolution from reform to revolution. The first is internal to Yemen. Aḥmad, as we saw in chapter two, could have learned one of two lessons from the attempted coup in 1948. Either he could have decided that in the wake of so much concentrated unrest from so many different parts of society, which he had been aware of since the mid-1940s, that some reform was needed, or he could have determined that in the wake of the attempted coup he needed to crack down on any dissent so nothing like it ever happened again. Aḥmad, of course, chose the latter course, which strengthened his hold on power in the short term while simultaneously undermining and weakening the prospect of dynastic succession. Throughout Aḥmad’s fourteen years in power, he continued his father’s process of consolidating power, only now exclusively within his immediate family. Yahyā had excluded everyone outside the Hāmīd al-Dīn family, alienating people and families who should have been allies. Aḥmad did something similar, only within the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, excluding his brothers for the sake of his son. Taken together, these two strands of power consolidation in the 1950s – excluding other sayyids and limiting the role of Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes – eventually weakened the imāmate to the point that it was unable to survive Aḥmad’s death. Power had
become so concentrated, first in the hands of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family and then in Aḥmad’s own line, that fewer and fewer people were invested in the survival of the imāmate, as it was constituted under Aḥmad. It also created many powerful enemies who otherwise might have been allies.

The second major thread that this chapter explores is the impact of outside ideas and interactions on the revolutionaries in Yemen. Unlike the first thread of this chapter, which was specific to Yemen, this thread examines and places Yemen within a regional context. In particular, it examines the Free Officers revolution in Egypt, Nasserism, socialism, as well as Arab nationalism, all of which play a role in the build-up to 1962. For instance, Nasser was the model of an ideal ruler for many of Aḥmad’s domestic opponents, who looked to the Egyptian president for inspiration and help throughout the second half of the 1950s. Nasser cultivated these relationships, reaching out to men like Muḥammad al-Zubayrī, whom he provided with a home and a job after the failed coup of 1948, allowing him to broadcast a weekly program on Yemen for Sawt al-Arab, Nasser’s pan-Arab radio station. The intellectual currents of socialism and Nasserism provided the theoretical framework and language for a shift in oppositional thinking in Yemen, moving Aḥmad’s opponents along the spectrum from attempting to reform the imāmate to backing a Republican revolution. Indeed, it is fair to say, that without the 1952 Revolution in Egypt there would have been no revolution in Yemen a decade later. The Egyptian revolution paved the way for the Yemeni one. Of critical importance in bringing about this change were factors such as the military exchange programs with Egypt and Iraq and the advisers and trainers that came from these countries to visit Yemen under Aḥmad. This was the second half of the equation. If the intellectual side provided the theory and atmosphere of revolution, the military side provided the tools for success. It was only once both of these were
in place, that Yemenis had both the language to articulate a revolution and the arms to carry it out that the revolution could take place. All that was needed was an appropriate trigger, which Aḥmad’s death provided.

The third thread of this chapter continues an argument that was introduced in chapter one about the spread of new technologies and ideologies, its power, and how it shaped and changed Yemen in the mid-twentieth century. Unlike his father, Aḥmad could not maintain a policy of pure isolation. In the 1950s this was no longer a feasible option. Yaḥyā banned radios; Aḥmad was forced to allow them because he could not enforce a prohibition. They were simply too prevalent and the state’s reach too limited. Under Yaḥyā, Yemenis had to travel abroad to understand what was happening in Cairo, Damascus, or Baghdad. Now, the outside world came to them. Newspapers and magazines filtered into the country, primarily through British-controlled Aden. However, given Yemen’s geographic isolation – both as a country and internally with villages spread out across the highlands – as well as the low literacy rates, these had a limited and indirect impact. First they influenced Yemen’s elite, who then repackaged and reformulated the currents for a local audience in poetry and argument as they were filtered down to rest of the population, sometimes in print but more often through the radio. Villages may not have had news kiosks, but by the 1950s they were acquiring radios, which spoke directly to the population in a way that newspapers and magazines could not. Yemenis who had never traveled abroad were able to follow the 1952 coup in Egypt and the running series of coups and counter-coups in Iraq and Syria. These political upheavals eventually reverberated in Yemen.

Toward the end of the chapter, I also delve into the details surrounding Aḥmad’s departure for Italy to cure a morphine addiction, the rule of his son, Muḥammad al-Badr, and Aḥmad’s eventual return. In doing so, I make two arguments. First, I want to show the type of
ruler al-Badr was, the mistakes and miscalculations that he made as a way of showing the type of imām and leader he would be during the revolution and civil war that followed, and I want to explain why it was so hard for many traditional Zaydis to follow him. Al-Badr was neither like his father nor was he like his father’s liberal opponents; he was a crown prince and heir to the imāmate who was also attracted to Nasserism and socialism. He was a liminal character, caught between different ideological currents and expectations. In some ways, al-Badr looked like an ideal compromise candidate, but he was a weak ruler who commanded little respect domestically and by the time he took power the opportunity for compromise was gone. This discussion of al-Badr introduces some of the arguments that we will see in Part II, which focus on his role as imām and why the Royalists were not ultimately successful in defeating the revolution.

Additionally, this chapter will build on the argument in chapter two about how Aḥmad alienated key power blocs, in this case the powerful al-Aḥmar family of tribal chieftains, to reveal the fragility of his regime. I focus on the relationship of Aḥmad and the al-Aḥmar family for two reasons. First, to illustrate the lengths Aḥmad was willing to go to maintain power. Second, I argue that this is a major fracture point in the relationship between powerful tribal powers such as the al-Aḥmar family and the imām. For centuries, tribal families had been kingmakers but never kings. After the revolution a tribal shaykh could aspire to be president. I argue that in attempting to put down a tribal revolt and ensure the succession of his son, Aḥmad overstepped by executing two members of the al-Aḥmar family and sowed the seeds of dynastic destruction, as the al-Aḥmar family would go on to become staunch Republicans determined to destroy the imamate and the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, which by mid-century had become synonymous.
This chapter brings these threads together to show how Aḥmad’s strength saved him but was unable, alongside the outside pressure of politics and technology, to ensure a successful dynastic succession. Aḥmad’s opponents, as varied as they were domestically, were united only by their opposition to an over-reaching imām, who seemed at odds with their vision of modernity. Aḥmad never repeated his father’s frequently cited, and perhaps apocryphal, line: “I would rather my people and I eat straw than let foreigners in.” By 1948, isolation as practiced by Yahyā was simply no longer an option. But if Aḥmad didn’t attempt to shun outside influences, he certainly tried to control them. It was to be a cautious and halting modernity that Yemen would experience and on the imām’s terms. This didn’t satisfy the triad group of intellectuals, military officers, and Free Yemeni holdovers. By alienating so many different people from so many different segments of society – tribal shykhhs, scholars and judges, sayyids, and what in the Yemeni context constituted liberals – Aḥmad set his son up to fail. A strong ruler willing and able to eliminate his enemies would have had a difficult time succeeding Aḥmad; a weak ruler, like Muḥammad al-Badr, simply had no chance. Imām Aḥmad was the last of a long line stretching back to the ninth century. He was Yemen’s final imām.

Concentration of Power

After the sack of Ṣan‘ā’ and the series of executions in Ḥajjah in early 1948, Aḥmad returned to Ta‘izz. Weeks earlier he had left the city as a crown prince in fear for his life, now he returned as imām. The 54-year-old wanted nothing to do with Ṣan‘ā’ or his father’s court

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1 Dresch, Modern Yemen, 50. See, Dresch’s discussion on page 231 where he says: “The sentiment may have been Yahyā’s. The wording almost certainly was not.” The “I” is also a bit misleading. The popular perception was that the sayyids had everything in Yemen, with the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family at the top of the social and political pyramid, which eventually gave rise to stories of massive wealth hidden at the top of Nuqum by Yahyā and gold hidden away by Aḥmad in Ta‘izz. Neither of these stories turned out to be true. Yahyā, in particular, lived simply. But the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family certainly had more than everyone else, treating the state – much of its land and all of its resources – as their personal property. But they never quite acquired what popular perception attributed to them. But this perception mattered and, along with unpopular taxes, it underlined revolts that found took the language of resisting dynastic and oppressive rule.
there. Instead he moved the capital to Ta‘izz, the city where he had his court and where he felt most comfortable. Aḥmad had never really cared for the capital, spending much of his life outside of Ṣan‘ā’ as his father’s deputy and emissary to different parts of the country. The bad blood ran both ways. Many residents of Ṣan‘ā’ would never forgive Aḥmad for unleashing the tribes on the city as they sacked Ṣan‘ā’ in 1948. Moving the capital to Ta‘izz was as much an act of self-preservation as it was one of revenge. As a child growing up in the poisonous political atmosphere of a ruling family with fourteen potential heirs, Aḥmad had often struggled to know whom he could trust, and as he got older this learned caution tended toward paranoia. In much the same way he ruled the country, Yaḥyā had played his sons off against one another. Despite being the oldest, Aḥmad knew that his father favored Muḥammad, his second son by a different wife. Indeed, Yaḥyā had refused to name Aḥmad crown prince while his brother was still alive. Only after Muḥammad drowned in 1933 did Yaḥyā grant Aḥmad the title. By the time Aḥmad seized the imāmate in 1948, he had another set of challenges to navigate. Families his father had relied on to help him find his feet as he was beginning to rule were the very ones who had organized the coup. One-time allies like the al-Wazīr family were now enemies of the state, either dead or in prison. Even Aḥmad’s own son – and the man he would eventually put in place to succeed him – was of little help. Muḥammad al-Badr hadn’t performed well during the coup, putting up a limited and brief struggle before he was captured by men loyal to al-Wazīr. For most men this would not have been a source of shame, but unlike his father and grandfather –

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3 The issue, as we saw in chapter 1, was first broached with Yaḥyā in 1923 and then again in 1924 (See: Ahmad bin Muḥammad al-Wazīr, Ḥayāt al-amūr ‘Ali bin ‘Abd Allāh al-Wazīr, n.p.: Manshūrāt al-ʿAṣr al-Ḥadīth, 1987, p. 209.) But at the time Yaḥyā was noncommittal. Only after Muḥammad died, did Yaḥyā himself grant Aḥmad the title.
4 This might be one reason for Aḥmad’s notoriously poor treatment of al-Badr, although another possible explanation is that Aḥmad simply treated al-Badr as his own father had treated him.
Aḥmad and Yahyā – al-Badr didn’t distinguished himself militarily as a young man.\(^5\) Yahyā had only been forced to juggle sons; Aḥmad had brothers and a son. And just as his father had consolidated power, eventually excluding everyone outside the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, so too did Aḥmad exclude, limiting the role of his brothers and, in time, ensuring that succession remained within his direct line.\(^6\) With this traditional avenue of support cut off, the new imām looked elsewhere for allies. What emerged was a sort of shadow court, centered on a single judge and a cluster of women.\(^7\) The judge, Ḥusayn al-Ḥalālī, was the same man who had refused al-Wazīr’s order to arrest Aḥmad during the coup and then warned the fleeing prince to avoid Ḥudayyadh. His loyalties had been tested under fire, and perhaps as recompenses the imām named him the head of the royal dīwān. A US delegation that visited Ta’izz in April 1950 concluded that al-Ḥalālī was “probably the most powerful man in the kingdom after the imām himself.”\(^8\) The same group of diplomats also noted that Aḥmad’s cabinet had “no real function.”\(^9\) Ministries and offices were little more than empty titles. At the time the minister of education, Aḥmad’s brother Isma‘īl, was in prison, and the foreign minister, another brother, had been out of the country for more than a year. These were titles and positions without functions. Aḥmad was also careful not to rely too much on Ḥasan, his next oldest brother, who had personally commanded the tribal militias that had destroyed al-Wazīr and sacked Ṣanʿā’. For an untrusting ruler, Ḥasan’s military prowess and ties to the tribes were a cause for concern. Aḥmad did,

\(^5\) Military prowess – being a “man of the sword” as we have already seen – is a key component of being an imām, and even when Aḥmad and Yahyā did not personally lead their troops into battle both imāms had a history of personal battlefield experience, which they could fall back on – al-Badr did not.

\(^6\) An interesting parallel to Aḥmad’s decision to keep the imamate in his direct line is the decision made by Ibn Saud, which saw the office of king in Saudi Arabia go from brother to brother, staying in one generation, before moving from father to son.

\(^7\) It is good not to overestimate the importance of either of these groups or to read into the sources’ silence on Aḥmad’s court, and yet there is something here. When Aḥmad distrusted nearly everyone in his public court he retreated to his private one, composed of the women of his family.


\(^9\) Childs, “Despatch,” 23.
however, make him governor of Ṣanʿā’, forcing his brother to live in the city he had just destroyed. It was in this context, when Ahmad was unable or unwilling to trust any of his male relatives, all of whom he suspected of coveting the imāmate, that he turned to the women in the family.\(^\text{10}\) His niece, Amat al-Karīm, handled the imāmic seals and much of the official correspondence.\(^\text{11}\) His daughters and wives often consoled and counseled him and, over time, they controlled his morphine intake as Ahmād became dangerously, morbidly obese.\(^\text{12}\) Ahmād had become so dependent on the women of his family that when two of his daughters wanted to marry, he reversed the traditional practice and demanded that their husbands move into the palace with their new wives and not the other way around.\(^\text{13}\)

In another sign of his growing concern for his personal safety, Ahmād also made frequent changes to his protection detail.\(^\text{14}\) Typically members of the imāmic bodyguard, the ‘ukfa, were drawn from a range of tribes in an effort to ensure balance and stability in the force, but Ahmad used only one: the Zarānīq. As a young prince in the late 1920s he had crushed the tribe during his conquest of the Tihāma.\(^\text{15}\) Two decades later, suspicious of the status quo, he looked to them for protection. Some found his choice of bodyguards odd, but for a monarch looking to maintain power through division Ahmād’s decision made sense.\(^\text{16}\) The Zarānīq were still a broken tribe, but in the years since Ahmād’s brutal subjugation the relationship between the two sides had mellowed to the point that when Ahmād fled Ta‘izz ahead of the assassins, he traveled first to

\(^\text{10}\) In Zaydī Islam only men are eligible to be imām.
\(^\text{12}\) Gabriele vom Bruck, in *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York: 2005, 255 lists the 12 wives of Imām Ahmād, although she says he only consummated marriage with 10 of the 12.
\(^\text{13}\) Another possible explanation for Ahmād’s reliance on the women in the family, although one that has less documentary support, is that he was simply more comfortable with them than he was with male relatives, perhaps as a result of spending so much time around women when he was younger.
\(^\text{14}\) This could also be seen as a sign of increased paranoia, although there were several assassination attempts against Ahmād including at least one that involved a bodyguard.
\(^\text{16}\) Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, 69. This is also another case of a ruler trusting those he knows. Ahmād knew the Zarānīq, he had a history with them, and they were a known quantity.
Tihāma and Zarānīq territory before turning north for Ḥajjah. As often happened in Yemen, his old enemies had become his new allies. The tribe’s weakness could also work to his advantage. By shunning the other tribes, particularly those in Ḥāshid and Bakīl, Aḥmad was using a classic ruling tactic: empowering the weak at the expense of the strong. At the same time, using Zarānīq bodyguards allowed Aḥmad to reward those who had been loyal to him during the chaotic days following his father’s assassination.

But in order to rule, Aḥmad had to do more than simply strengthen the weak. He also needed to weaken the strong. To establish his authority and reach, it was essential that Aḥmad neutralize potential threats before they could act. One of the most prominent of these threats was the Bayt al-Aḥmar family of Ḥāshid and, much like he had as governor of Ḥajjah in the 1930s, Aḥmad set out to neutralize them. Shortly after he established himself back in Ta‘izz, Aḥmad summoned Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar, the paramount shaykh of Ḥāshid. In the memoirs of Ḥusayn’s son, ‘Abdullāh, written many years after the fact, Aḥmad initially charms the delegation, greeting each member with an individual word and soliciting their views on the situation in the north. Aḥmad asked after their quarters in the guesthouse and made sure that they had everything they needed. But beneath the polite exterior, ‘Abdullāh writes, was a plotting politician probing for weaknesses.

Imāms couldn’t rule without the support of the tribes, and shaykhs couldn’t maintain their privileged position in the face of imāmic opposition. In Yemen, the only variable was who dominated the relationship. There were weak imāms and there were strong imāms; Aḥmad wanted to be a strong imām. Aḥmad had already bested Ḥusayn once, forcing his brother into exile, but that had been years earlier when Yaḥyā had been imām. This time, Aḥmad needed to win on his own. A few days into Ḥusayn’s visit, Aḥmad brought up the issue of Bāqī al-Naqīb, a

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17 Aḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 49.
prominent tribesman in al-‘Uṣaymāt – al-Aḥmar’s tribe within the Ḥāshid confederation – who often acted as Ḥusayn’s representative in Ṣan‘ā’. Al-Naqīb, the new imām alleged rather suddenly one day, had supported the al-Wazīr and the coup. As his guest squirmed under the direct accusation, Aḥmad explained that until al-Naqīb was turned over he would have no choice but to detain Ḥusayn in his place. It didn’t matter that everyone knew, as ‘Abdullāh would later write, that the charge was a “fabrication.” What mattered was what Aḥmad could get away with. The new imām was showing exactly how powerful he was. Only a few months after avoiding an assassination and overcoming an attempted coup, Aḥmad was now strong enough to imprison the head of Ḥāshid on a trumped up charge. This was Aḥmad tightening his grip on power instead of allowing for reforms in the wake of the coup, and demonstrating that he could imprison whom he wanted when he wanted. As we will see, this consolidation of power and refusal to loosen his grip would, in time, weaken the very imāmate Aḥmad was attempting to preserve.

**Prison and the Seeds of a Revolt**

By the second anniversary of the failed coup, which Aḥmad had taken to celebrating as “Victory Day” complete with celebratory fires and a cannon salute over Ṣan‘ā’, he felt secure enough that he freed many of the liberals he had been detaining in Ḥajjah. During the celebration in 1950 a column of barefooted soldiers in sharp white robes, flying the red flag of Mutawakkilite Kingdom, marched across a dusty parade ground in Ta‘izz, while overhead DC-3s, fixed wing propeller planes, dropped the text of Aḥmad’s speech on the crowd. Aḥmad had

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18 See the discussion of this incident in Aḥmar, *Mudḥakkīrāt*, 49 – 55. Aḥmad’s actions were a serious breach of protocol, and are reminiscent of Yahyā reading about the potential coup in 1948. This, as we will see, wouldn’t be the last time Aḥmad would violate unwritten norms when it came to dealing with the al-Aḥmar family.
asked Aḥmad Nu‘mān, one of the recently released prisoners, to address the crowd. Nu‘man was an excellent writer and orator with a deep sonorous voice, and he knew what was expected of him. Several weeks earlier, Aḥmad had given orders for Nu‘mān to be taken out of the dungeon and installed in a house in Ḥajjah where he was reunited with his wife, two sons, and a brother who had also been in prison. There are two ways to read Aḥmad’s actions. Either he was trying to win over Nu‘mān and others after the months of harsh treatment, or he was not so subtly reminding Nu‘mān of exactly what was at stake should he continue to oppose his rule. However, looking at the context of Aḥmad’s other actions, such as his imprisonment of Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar, as well as the ones he would take in the future, it seems clear that it was the latter. Aḥmad wasn’t responding to the attempted coup by loosening restraints and liberalizing as the Free Yemenis had wanted, rather he was tightening his grip on power and showing his enemies what would happen if they opposed him.

Not all of the prisoners fared so well. One inmate compared the cells in Ḥajjah to “a stinking sewer teaming with worms.” Making matters worse for the prisoners was the fact that none of them received any news from the outside world. They didn’t know if Aḥmad had punished their families, imprisoned their sons, or destroyed their homes. But many of the prisoners were resourceful, most of them were well-educated and they were curious, inquisitive men. As the threat of death faded with the passing months, they gradually began to organize. Older men formed study circles to teach their younger colleagues, going over everything from Arabic grammar to Qur’anic recitation. With both Zaydīs and Shafi‘īs locked up, there was a blurring and blending of religious practice that furthered the open atmosphere of discussion that

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23 This was Aḥmad al-Shāmī, who is quoted in Douglas, *The Free Yemeni Movement*, 159.
grew in the corners of cells. There were even books written in the Ḥajjah prison.\textsuperscript{26} The roots of Yemen’s future revolution sprang from the failure of the 1948 coup. The men used whatever they could find.\textsuperscript{27} Charcoal and bits of metal served as writing instruments for lessons that could be scratched in the dirt, onto flattened tins, or even “blackened pieces of wood.”\textsuperscript{28} For younger military officers like ‘Abdullah al-Sallāl, being locked up in Ḥajjah with members of the Yemen’s educated class was life changing. He had only ever been an impoverished butcher’s son—a low rank in terms of social status—and a raw recruit sent to Iraq for military training. Now he was mixing with Yemen’s intellectual elite. Social barriers that existed outside of the prison disappeared within its walls. Ḥajjah, he said later, was his “university.”\textsuperscript{29}

As Aḥmad settled into court life at Taizz, growing more comfortable and more secure, he listened to petitions and pleas from the families of men still locked up in Ḥajjah. Gradually he began to release some of the men as test cases, first Shafi‘īs like Nu‘mān and later Zaydīs, which Aḥmad seems to have viewed as more of a threat, perhaps because the sayyids among them could theoretically issue a da‘wa. Another possibility, raised by Douglas, suggests that since Aḥmad lived in a largely Shafi‘ī town he may have wanted to curry favor with the locals.\textsuperscript{30} While impossible to completely discount, this doesn’t appear likely as Aḥmad rarely showed himself to be someone who was swayed by public opinion. Much more likely is that, as the Iraqi officer Jamāl Jamīl argued, Aḥmad also believed that the Zaydīs had been more active in scheming to assassinate his father. By the early 1950s, much had been publicly forgiven if not privately forgotten. In October 1951, Aḥmad granted Muḥammad al-Zubayrī’s family.

\textsuperscript{26} See, for example, the works of Muḥammad al-Fusayl such as \textit{Nahwa al-Nūr, Ṣan‘ā’}, Wizārat al-thaqāfa (reprinted) 2004.


\textsuperscript{28} Douglas, \textit{The Free Yemeni Movement}, 160 n. 2.

\textsuperscript{29} Douglas, \textit{The Free Yemeni Movement}, 162.

\textsuperscript{30} Douglas, \textit{The Free Yemeni Movement}, 160.
permission to leave Yemen to join the exiled poet and politician in Pakistan. Aḥmad, who knew Zubayrī well, may have been moved by suggestions that Zubayrī had acted out of loyalty to al-Wazīr, who had raised him after his own father died. Zubayrī had been out of the country as part of the three-man mission to Saudi Arabia to gain support for the rebels when al-Wazīr’s government fell in March 1948. Ibn Saud informed the three men that they couldn’t remain in the kingdom, and so for the second time in his life Zubayrī went into exile. The Yemeni poet and scholar eventually settled in the newly created Islamic state of Pakistan, while he waited for something to change.

Outside Revolutions

On July 23, 1952 something did change when a group of junior military officers calling themselves the “Free Officers Movement,” overthrew King Farouk of Egypt, bringing to an end the Albanian dynasty that had ruled the country for nearly a century-and-a-half. Watching the coup unfold from Pakistan – a non-Arabic speaking country far from Yemen – Zubayrī was intrigued. Days after the Egyptian coup, in August 1952, the Yemeni exile uprooted his family yet again and he moved back to Cairo, where he had studied as a student in the 1940s. Nasser and the rest of the Egyptian Free Officers wanted to reproduce their revolution across the Middle East, overthrowing colonialism and monarchies wherever they existed. As part of this project they established a radio program, Sawt al-ʿArab (The Voice of the Arabs), and on January 7, 1954, al-Zubayrī gave the first of what would become a weekly segment on Yemen. The

31 Ralph G. Clark, “Dispatch Nov. 6, 1951” in Rashid, Yemen Under the Rule of Imam Ahmad, 41.
32 It is a tempting story, but much of what we know about Aḥmad suggests that his decision was driven more by politics than personal compassion. Still it is important to remember that under Aḥmad politics was highly personalized and many of these men, on all sides, knew each other well.
33 The first, as we saw in chapter 1, was when he fled Aḥmad’s court to Aden when the former was crown prince.
34 For a poetic overview of al-Zubayrī’s views of Yemen from this period see his “novel” Maʾsāṭ waq al-wāq, which has been re-issued several times and is widely available.
chubby poet with the lyrical voice already had legions of fans among Yemen’s intelligentsia, young men like future prime minister Muḥsin al-‘Aynī who studied his poetry in secret.37 Al-Zubayrī’s radio program from Cairo soon provided him with a new and broader audience, moving him from just speaking to the elites as he did with his poetry to communicating directly with the masses. It is difficult to overstate the importance of the Egyptian revolution in 1952 to the one that would take place in Yemen a decade later. Up until 1952 and, indeed, even for a few years after, most Yemeni opposition figures favored reforming the imāmate. Only in the shadow of the Egyptian revolution and with Nasser’s explicit support were the Free Yemenis willing to abolish the imāmate.

Imām Yaḥyā, as we saw in chapter one, had managed to prohibit radios in Yemen, but as technology advanced and the wireless sets shrunk to a size that could fit in a person’s pocket Aḥmad was forced to capitulate. Instead of issuing an order that could easily be defied, he simply allowed what he couldn’t prevent. Villagers who lived only a few miles apart but, thanks to Yemen’s steep mountains and poor roads, had inhabited separate worlds, now had a shared reference point and a new vocabulary. Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad were still foreign cities far away, but they were no longer unimaginable. Soldiers had gone there to train, students to study and now, thanks to the radio, al-Zubayrī was speaking to Yemenis about Yemen from Cairo. What happened in the rest of the Arab world started to take on an intimacy that it never had in the past, the region was shrinking. Things that had once been foreign and distant now mattered in a way they never had before. Aḥmad also pursued a more open diplomatic policy than his father, establishing diplomatic relations with a number of “eastern and western bloc

37 Douglas The Free Yemeni Movement, 176.
countries.”

The geography and isolation that had kept Yemen and its imāmate insulated from broader trends was starting to unravel. Al-Zubayrī constantly expounded on Nasser’s two evils of colonialism and monarchy, criticizing the British in Aden, who had once given him refuge, hammering home points like “occupation” and individual freedom. But on Aḥmad’s rule, he took what historian J. Leigh Douglas called a “soft line.” Part of this was Nasser’s desire to utilize Aḥmad against the British, which the Egyptian ruler considered the greater of two evils, but al-Zubayrī – in the 1950s – still had hopes of his own that Aḥmad could change and reform Yemen for the better. Even at this point, six years after the failed coup, the Free Yemenis were still looking to reform the imāmate not overthrow it. Aḥmad and al-Zubayrī, as we have already seen, had a long and complicated history, but each saw in the other an enemy who could be made an ally. Al-Zubayrī’s Zaydī heritage and his popular and intellectual appeal made him a powerful potential tool if he could be properly controlled, while for the poet activist the imām, who had often flirted with the liberals, remained the only one who could truly transform Yemen into the country he wanted it to be. In the end, their differences would prove to be too great to be bridged. But for a time in the mid-1950s the two men tried.

Al-Halālī, whose health had been failing almost from the beginning of Aḥmad’s reign, died in 1953, and without his primary confidant the imām drifted further into isolation. He had come to power with few friends he could trust, and as his old ones died he failed to replace them. Instead, Aḥmad consulted astrologers and became obsessed with the idea of death and divine judgment. To counter these fears the obese and increasingly sedentary imām went on weeklong

binges of fasting and prayer. But for someone who controlled every aspect of government, from
when planes could take off to the number of inkwells in schools, this meant that the government
periodically ground to a halt while the imām sought peace and respite. To his opponents, this
only underscored the need for reform and change. Aḥmad, they felt, was holding the country
back, refusing to open it up to the intellectual and technological developments that were
sweeping across the rest of the region. In his more lucid periods, Aḥmad also worked to
cultivate an image as a master of the supernatural as a way of maintaining an aura of invincibility
and power. He often showed himself in the window of his palace in Ta’izz, stroking what
looked like a tiger.43 Paid agents spread rumors that, like Solomon, he communicated with jinn.
Along with Bahut, the Terrible, he also became known as “the Jinn.” How much of this was a
desire by Aḥmad to intimidate the population into submission is unclear, but that was the effect it
often had. Aḥmad was rarely seen in Ta’izz, but his presence was always felt. The imām’s
personal tastes also tended toward the gaudy. In Ta’izz, electric and neon lights lit up his portrait
inside the palace, and on the relatively rare occasions when he toured the town slaves kept the
sun off his head with umbrellas that became a mark of royalty in Yemen.44 Along with the rest
of his court, the imām also became a great collector of contemporary western knick-knacks such
as toy trains and figurines. Years later, when the American travel writer Eric Hansen toured the
imāmic palace in Taizz, which is now a national museum, he compared its contents to that of his
childhood home in 1950s America.45 In an atmosphere such as this, as Dresch explains, politics

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43 When his palace was raided in 1962 after his death and the coup that followed it was found that the tiger was
stuffed. For later descriptions of Aḥmad’s palace, which was turned into a museum, see Eric Hansen, *Motoring with
down during the fighting in Ta‘izz in 2015 and 2016.
44 On lights see Dresch, *Modern History*, 69.
45 Hansen, *Motoring with Mohammed*. 
“turned on talk of plot and counter-plot among the imām’s family.” After al-Ḥalālī’s death, with the opposition either in exile, jail or living under suspicion, Aḥmad found himself surrounded by sycophants and yes-men. One writer, Aḥmad al-Shāmī who was in prison at the time, wrote a book placing Aḥmad among the world’s great intellects and leaders. Men like Plato and Bacon, Napoleon and Churchill. He was soon released.

The non-resident American consul in Aden, Herman Eilts, put his finger on the problem in a 1953 diplomatic cable. The imām’s “administrative dilemma,” he wrote, stemmed from the “lack of a body of truly reliable and loyal (some may indeed argue insufficiently trusted) subordinates.” More so than even his father, Aḥmad ruled primarily on his own. But he did so in an environment that was markedly different from the one Yaḥyā had faced. The idea of near complete isolation, which Yaḥyā had endorsed and used to his advantage was no longer possible. The world was creeping in and Aḥmad had to adapt. He had more tools and better technology, but the country around him was changing. One man, no matter how powerful, could no longer determine everything that went in or out of the country; ideas traveled on radio waves, and the temptation of foreign luxuries often carried with them the seeds of change. By the mid-1950s, Yemen was isolated but no longer impenetrable. This new openness had political repercussions, as ideas and ideologies that might once have been kept out of the country now found their way in and this, in turn, did much to move the Free Yemenis from favoring reform to championing a revolution. Indeed, many of them were listening to al-Zubayrī broadcast weekly from Cairo. The age of isolation, no matter how porous under Yaḥyā, was over.

The Rise of al-Badr

46 Dresch, Modern History, 69.
47 For a description of this book see Dresch, Modern History, 65. The book itself no longer appears to be extant.
In July 1954, King Saud of Saudi Arabia, traveled south to Ṣan‘ā’ to meet Imām Aḥmad. It was the first time Aḥmad had visited the city since 1948, and he was more than a little surprised at what he found. His brother, Ḥasan, who had been so instrumental in putting down al-Wazīr’s attempted coup six years earlier, had utilized his two positions as prime minister and mayor of Ṣan‘ā’ to take effective control of the former capital and much of the highlands in the north.⁴⁹ Aḥmad’s apparent lack of knowledge of circumstances in Ṣan‘ā’ suggests two things simultaneously. First, that for as much as Aḥmad tried to control everything in Yemen he had little sense of what was happening in the country’s largest city. The second thing it suggests is that the shock of finding things in Ṣan‘ā’ different than he expected led Aḥmad to further tighten control over the government. After the summit with King Saud, Aḥmad replaced Ḥasan with his 26-year-old son, Muḥammad al-Badr. Later that year, Aḥmad al-Shāmī, the scholar who had just been released from prison, read out a poem in Ḥudaydah calling for al-Badr to be named crown prince.⁵⁰ Unlike under Yaḥyā when scholars had approached the imām in private, asking him to name his son as his successor, this time the call was made in public. The Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty had already been established and al-Shāmī was simply calling for what many anticipated.⁵¹ Aḥmad was consolidating political power within his own line. Unlike Yaḥyā who managed to bypass the rest of the Zaydī sayyids by naming his eldest son as his replacement, Aḥmad was excluding his brothers. The circle of power, which had already grown quite small, continued to shrink. Now not only was Aḥmad antagonizing the rest of the sayyid class, which he could have used to help govern, but he was also creating fault-lines with his own family.

As a sign of just how powerful Ḥasan had become in Ṣanʿā’, the prince orchestrated a piece in the semi-official *al-Imān* newspaper, which was still being published in Ṣanʿā’, arguing that al-Badr lacked the credentials to be imām.52 It is unclear whether Ḥasan believed he was too strong to be removed, or if he simply thought that an indirect attack in the newspaper would invite only a proportional response. But whatever his reasoning, he was mistaken. Aḥmad reacted strongly. Part of this may have been the imām’s desire to reassert control over Ṣanʿā’ and his increasingly independent younger brother, whom he believed represented a threat to his rule. Some of his brothers, such as Ibrāhīm, had already made a play for the imāmate and after Aḥmad’s trip to Ṣanʿā’ in 1954, he saw first-hand how much support Ḥasan enjoyed.53 Aḥmad used the article as an excuse to send Ḥasan out of the country, dispatching him to New York as the head of Yemen’s mission to the UN.54 For the time being at least, one potential threat – both to him as well as to his son – had been neutralized. Interestingly, many of the Free Yemenis who had participated in the 1948 failed coup supported Aḥmad’s effective exile of Ḥasan. Reformers like Aḥmad Nu‘mān and ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Iryānī had pinned their hopes on the young al-Badr, whom they believed they could influence. They didn’t want to see a lateral or horizontal succession, from Aḥmad to one of his brothers. They wanted a vertical transfer of power, from Aḥmad to the next generation, which they believed was more interested in, and open to, reform. Like al-Zubayrī abroad, the Free Yemenis at home in 1954 and 1955 were looking to restructure and reform the imāmate not abolish it all together. Even after the failure of the coup in 1948, it appears as though they were still hoping to implement something like a constitutional monarchy.

53 It is interesting to note that Ḥasan received this support in Ṣanʿā’ despite the fact that it was he who personally oversaw the sacking of the city in 1948.
54 Yemen had joined the UN on September 30, 1947, when Yahyā was still imam, see: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/PV.92](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/PV.92) for the minutes of the meeting and the statements welcoming Yemen and Pakistan, which joined at the same time.
Within months of Ḥasan’s departure to New York, the Free Yemenis were forced to put their preference for al-Badr to the test. In late March 1955, a small dispute between some soldiers and a group of villagers outside of Ta‘izz boiled over and nearly cost Aḥmad the imāmate. One narrative claims that a pair of soldiers, who were tasked with collecting firewood, were prevented from doing so by irate villagers. In the scuffle one soldier was killed and another wounded. Another version has the soldiers attempting to collect taxes from the villagers in Hawbān, during which three soldiers were killed in clashes. Whatever the exact details of the dispute, the villagers petitioned the imām, who sided with them against the soldiers. When the garrison commander in Ta‘izz, Colonel Aḥmad al-Thulāyā, heard about the dispute he saw an opportunity to put a plan he had secretly been working on into action. Months earlier, when Aḥmad had visited Ṣan‘ā’ to meet King Saud, al-Thulāyā had been part of a small group plotting to assassinate the imām. That attempt failed, but the men weren’t discovered and al-Thulāyā was able to return to his post at Ta‘izz. From there he worked with a small handful of men on a second plot to overthrow Aḥmad. Much like the Free Yemenis, al-Thulāyā and his co-conspirators didn’t want to do away with the imāmate, they only wanted to modify it, to make it more modern and accommodating. In truth, however, al-Thulāyā lacked a concrete plan for what the imāmate would look like after Aḥmad. They simply wanted to replace Aḥmad with his younger brother ‘Abdullāh, in the hopes that a change in leaders would mean a change in circumstances. The insistence of Aḥmad’s domestic opponents to work within the imāmic system rather than attempting to subvert it or go outside of it suggests just how important the imāmate was in mid-twentieth-century Yemen. Many wanted reforms and changes to the

55 For this version see Douglas, The Free Yemeni Movement, 187.
56 For this version see Naji, al-Tāriḵ al-‘askarī lil-yaman, 193-194.
system, but even after the failed coup of 1948 no one wanted a completely new system, at least not yet.

The coup eventually failed, as Āḥmad outsmarted the plotters – saying he would transfer power “from his right hand to his left hand” – and then turned the tide by sheer force of personality, compelling his bodyguards to stand and fight.\textsuperscript{58} Unlike in 1948, when Ibrahīm, another of Yaḥyā’s sons was found dead in his cell in Ḥajjah, this time Āḥmad bypassed pretense, ordering ‘Abdullāh to be beheaded.\textsuperscript{59} After the failed coup Āḥmad realized he needed to do something to solidify his hold on power. He didn’t trust many of the liberals who were increasingly surrounding his son, but there was one man Āḥmad thought could help him: Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Shortly after al-Thulāyā’s failed revolt, Āḥmad officially named al-Badr crown prince. With Ḥasan in New York and ‘Abdullāh in the grave, there was no resistance from his remaining brothers. One of al-Badr’s first assignments was a regional trip to Saudi Arabia to express his father’s thanks for Saudi’s support during the difficulties in Ta‘izz. After he met with King Saud, he traveled on to Cairo to convey a similar message to Nasser, who had remained uncharacteristically quiet during the days of the attempted coup.

Nasser was fond of the young prince, who he saw as part of the new generation of leaders that he was helping to shape across Africa and the Arab world. The meetings went well. Al-Badr admired Nasser and the Egyptian president liked al-Badr’s talk of reform and change.

There were, however, still signs that for all the talk of agreement and cooperation on the surface

\textsuperscript{58} Muḥsin al-‘Aynī, \textit{Khamsūn ‘Āman fi al-rimāl al-mutaharrika}, al-Mīḥāq, Ṣanʿā’: 2006, 30. Al-Thulāyā, who as a soldier had no specialized knowledge in Islamic law, appeared unaware that such a move – transferring something from the superior to the weaker – was impossible. Instead, he interpreted Āḥmad’s deliberately vague wording as an abdication in favor of the imām’s brother ‘Abdullāh. Part of this confusion may have been the result of the popular desire for reform and restructuring of the imāmate itself. Even though surrendering power as an imām was unprecedented – challengers seized power it wasn’t gifted to them – the constant calls for change in the structure of the imāmate may have led al-Thulāyā and ‘Abdullāh, who was in Taizz, to believe that Āḥmad was indeed about to abdicate.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibrahīm and ‘Abdullāh were full brothers. The public execution of one of Yaḥyā’s sons may well have been a turning point for the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family as well as other sayyids who were increasingly seeing Āḥmad as a tyrant.
the two men represented incompatible systems that could never co-exist. During Badr’s visit to Cairo, Aḥmad Nu‘mān gave a speech on Sawt al-ʿArab praising Nasser for his support of Imām Aḥmad. During his broadcast Nu‘mān mentioned “reactionism and backwardness.” When al-Badr’s party arrived back in Yemen, the imām was waiting for them.

“What is this ‘reactionism’?” Aḥmad fumed at Nu‘mān during a cabinet meeting. Before Nu‘mān could respond someone else chimed in: “Reactionism means the preservation of religious traditions and Islamic principles.” As the rest of the cabinet nodded their heads in agreement, Imām Aḥmad pointed to his sword. “I have heard that some are asking for changes. If I hear anymore about this my only answer will be to behead anyone asking for change, even if it were my own son, the Amīr al-Badr.”

Part of this may have been a stylized political performance by Imām Aḥmad, similar to the one he gave in 1944 when he was crown prince. He needed Nasser’s support internationally, but he also needed to appear strong domestically. Treading such a fine line often forced Aḥmad into contradictory and, at times, almost schizophrenic behavior, none of which was helped by his deepening reliance on morphine. In October and November 1956, Nasser faced down the UK, France and Israel in what became known as the Suez Crisis. Militarily, Egyptian forces did not perform particularly well. In fact, Nasser came close to firing his commander, ʿAbd al-Hakīm ʿĀmir, after the poor showing. But politically, Nasser’s star had never been brighter. He was the hero of the Arab world, a leader who had stood up to the twin forces of Israel and imperialism and emerged victorious.

In Ta‘izz, Aḥmad watched as Nasser’s popularity grew with the younger, reform minded court crowd, including his own son. Egypt had sent a military training mission to Yemen in

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60 Quoted in Douglas, The Free Yemeni Movement, 195.
1954, ostensibly to help the imām combat the British along his southern border, and Nasser followed that up by dispatching a delegation of police trainers to Yemen in 1957. These mid-level contacts between Egyptian trainers and Yemeni officers, along with the Yemenis studying abroad in Cairo, would lay the foundation for years of cooperation and coordination. Egypt was developing muscle memory and, what historian Jesse Ferris calls, “reflex” when it came to aiding and assisting in Yemen. In the 1950s this was directed against the British in Aden, but in time the target would shift. Like Nasser, Imām Aḥmad struggled to balance his two primary enemies. There were the British in Aden, whom he was constantly tweaking and pressing, and there was the growing threat of republicanism and revolution as characterized by Nasser. Flexible as ever, Aḥmad believed he could use Nasser against the British, while maintaining a hard line at home to keep domestic reformers at bay.

In early 1958, Aḥmad saw an opportunity to do both, to gain Nasser’s support against the British and to neutralize the reformers at home. On February 1, 1958, Egypt and Syria had joined to form the United Arab Republic. A few weeks later, in March 1958, Aḥmad surprised everyone by asking to join the pair of revolutionary states in what would become known as the United Arab States. By joining Nasser’s union, Aḥmad effectively silenced criticism. Sawt al-ʿArab, which had always taken a rather soft line on Aḥmad because of his opposition to the British, couldn’t criticize a co-ruler, while Aḥmad’s domestic opponents, who often looked to Nasser for rhetorical support, were outflanked. They couldn’t criticize Aḥmad without also criticizing, by extension, Nasser himself – a move few were willing to make. The union was strange and uncomfortable, to be sure, but it solved, at least for the moment, Aḥmad’s two biggest problems. Joining Egypt and Syria gave Aḥmad the time and space he felt he needed to

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63 Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 32.
solidify his rule and ensure the succession of his son. But within months of his decision, Aḥmad was on his way to Rome for medical attention and the space and time that he had so cleverly won with his political maneuver was squandered before he had a chance to use it.

**Aḥmad’s Decline**

By early 1959 Aḥmad was addicted to morphine. He put on weight, and his expanding girth required extra support for toilet seats and chairs throughout the palace in Ta‘izz. His health was failing and the addiction was becoming obvious. Court whispers of his decline had made their way into the market, and hardly anyone who came in contact with the imām believed Aḥmad would survive much longer. For years he had been dependent on western doctors, but even they were proving incapable of treating his worsening condition. Several members of the Hamīd al-Dīn family had received medical attention in Italy, and in April 1959 Aḥmad followed them to Italy, leaving Yemen in one of the airplanes he so mistrusted. Few thought he would ever return.

On his own for the first time, al-Badr quickly established an aviation college and invited several groups of Egyptian trainers and experts to come to the country, moves his father had long resisted and put off, accepting only token number of Egyptians into his realm. At the same time, in effort to curry popular favor, al-Badr announced a 25 percent pay increase for Yemeni soldiers. He also removed the head of the regular army ‘Alī bin Ibrāhīm, an aging officer who had served under his grandfather, and replaced him with ‘Abd al-Qādir Abū Ṭālib, who was thought to be more progressive and modern, more in line with the direction al-Badr wanted to take the country. But Yemen had been hemorrhaging money for years with little coming into

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64 Aḥmar, *Mudhakkirāt*, 57.
the country and the treasury couldn’t match al-Badr’s promise. When Aḥmad had ordered $3 million in Russian weapons, US diplomats had publicly wondered where he found the money. King Saʿud suggested at the time that his neighbor had secret stores of wealth. “The Imām has enough money. He has been hoarding riyals – he is very miserly.” Still when the bill came due for the Chinese construction of the Ḥudaydah - Ṣanʿā’ road in January 1959 there was nothing to pay them with. “You made up the dough,” Aḥmad reputedly told al-Badr. “Now bake the bread.” Making the situation even worse was a third year of drought, which necessitated famine aid from the US and forced farmers in lower Yemen to flee to Aden in hopes of work. Before he left for Italy, Aḥmad had even been forced to sell gold abroad in order to pay soldiers their regular salary. In spite of all of this, al-Badr had publicly announced a pay increase almost as soon as his father left the country. Why Badr miscalculated so badly is not clear – he may have simply confused desire with capability – but what is clear is that his mistake set off a chain-reaction that nearly destroyed the country and severely undermined his authority as a ruler before he even succeeded his father. The crisis also illustrated that al-Badr, regardless of what the reformers had seen in him up to that point, was not going to be able to both implement the reforms they wanted and hold the country together. Al-Badr’s chance to prove himself a compromise candidate, someone who could meet the demands of the Free Yemenis while maintaining the imāmate, ended with his failure in 1959. He would never really get another chance, and his imāmate would last only a single week.

When the soldiers in Ṣanʿā’ realized that the promised pay raise was not forthcoming they started muttering and, by some accounts, plotting against al-Badr. The young crown prince

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68 Quoted in Dresch, Modern Yemen, 82.
69 Quoted in Dresch, Modern Yemen, 82.
70 Dresch, Modern Yemen, 82.
panicked and compounded his earlier mistake by asking the Egyptians to come to his aid.\textsuperscript{71} He also ordered the arrest of 17 officers he believed were plotting against him and flew to Ṣan‘ā’ to take control of the situation for himself.\textsuperscript{72} What had started as al-Badr’s attempt to cast himself as Yemen’s Nasser, a reform minded man of the people, was quickly spinning out of control.

That summer things continued to deteriorate. The crackdown by Egyptian trainers and tribal forces was incredibly unpopular and soldiers in Ṣan‘ā’ were moving toward open mutiny. Watching events unfold in Ṣan‘ā’, al-Badr who was surrounded by a group of young and inexperienced advisers, made his third mistake and called in the tribes for help.

Ḥāshid under the leadership of Ḥusayn al-不克不及 and his oldest son Ḥamīd, who had long been whispering in al-Badr’s ear about establishing a republic with al-Badr as the president and himself as prime minister, responded to the crown prince’s call for help. But their aid came at a price. Al-Badr nearly emptied the treasury to pay his tribal allies in order to offset the mutinous military, which he had helped spark by running short of funds. For these reasons his popularity continued to plummet. Bringing the tribes into Ṣan‘ā’ brought back unpleasant memories for the city’s inhabitants who had lived through the sack of Ṣan‘ā’ barely a decade earlier. From his hospital bed in Italy, Aḥmad got word of the unrest at home and in August, against his doctor’s orders, he set sail for Yemen. The imām was furious with his son’s performance. Aḥmad’s poor mood may also have contributed to his poor meeting with Nasser as his ship passed through the Suez Canal. Using his recent hospital stay as cover, Aḥmad refused to rise and greet Nasser.

The Egyptian president was insulted. Nasser considered himself the senior leader in the triumvirate of the United Arab State and did not appreciate the slight, particularly after he had already come to Port Said to greet Aḥmad instead of having Aḥmad come to him in Cairo.

\textsuperscript{71} Douglas, \textit{The Free Yemeni Movement}, 223.
\textsuperscript{72} Douglas, \textit{The Free Yemeni Movement}, 223.
Aḥmad clearly dominated the power dynamics of the meeting, a victory that infuriated Nasser even more a few days later when the bed-ridden imām docked in Ḥudaydah as defiant and blustery as ever. Two days after his ship arrived in port on August 10, 1959, Aḥmad laid down the gauntlet for his domestic opponents, making it clear that he was back and he was still in charge. “Here is the horse, here is the field,” he cried in a radio address to the country, directly challenging all those who opposed him to come to Ḥudaydah and confront him directly.⁷³

Aḥmad’s surprising return shocked his opponents and at least temporarily reconfigured the political landscape in Yemen. Once again al-Badr was backed by his father, who seemed as indestructible as ever. But the imām’s private treasury was nearly empty. This was the money he needed to rule; now he needed to clean up the mess his son had made in barely four months of rule.

Violating the Past

Aḥmad quickly grasped the mistakes his son had made, and immediately tried to rectify them. At the top of the list was the money Badr had given to the tribes. After three successive years of drought and a pair of failed coup attempts, Aḥmad was weaker than at anytime since 1948. The illusion of control he had maintained throughout the 1950s had been shattered while he was away in Rome. Aḥmad needed the cooperation and consent of a rather large bloc of domestic players to maintain his position, and to keep them all in line and on his side he relied on an ever-shifting mixture of persuasion and inducements. And to do that he needed the money al-Badr had given away. Shortly after arriving back in the country Aḥmad asked for the money back. Most of it had gone to Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Āḥmar and Ḥāshid and that is where he concentrated his early efforts. Aḥmad moved first, disbanding the Ḥāshid irregular force.⁷⁴

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⁷³ Abū Lahūm, al-Yaman, 141.
While not necessarily surprising, the decision put al-Aḥmar on notice. For years, first as a crown prince and then as the imām, Aḥmad had been clashing with the al-Aḥmar family, needing them weak enough that he could influence and instruct them but not so weak that they couldn’t shape the decisions of Ḥāshid. The loss of money was a zero-sum game, weakening him while strengthening them.

On October 6, Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar traveled to Ḥudaydah for a meeting to discuss what to do about Aḥmad’s return to the country. Many of the men present had been comfortable with al-Badr. He was weak enough to be pliable. But his father couldn’t be bullied, and now he was coming for them. Along with the others, Ḥusayn agreed on a plan to assassinate the imām.

The idea was that the assassins would kill Aḥmad while he was at his palace in Sukhna, roughly 15 miles outside of Ḥudaydah, while both Ḥāshid and Bakīl would rise up in revolt to prevent anyone else from seizing the imāmate. It is unclear exactly who the plotters thought would rule after Aḥmad, some have suggested a republic with Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar, Ḥusayn’s eldest son, as president, but this seems doubtful. Most likely, they just wanted to get rid of Aḥmad and would deal with whatever came next on the assumption that whoever or whatever followed him couldn’t be any worse. But before the plot could be put in motion, Aḥmad dispatched a force of 2,000 men into Ḥāshid territory in an effort to get Ḥusayn to give up the money. The imām’s soldiers failed to retrieve the money and retreated back to Ḥudaydah. Undeterred, Aḥmad organized a second, larger expedition. Years of tensions started to boil over as Ḥusayn reacted to the show of force by leading Ḥāshid into open revolt against the imām. There were now essentially two parallel actions against Aḥmad, the secret bombing plot, which was still in the works, and the Ḥāshid led revolt aimed at overthrowing the imām. Weakened and impoverished

75 Abū Laḥūm, al-Yaman, 147.
76 Abū Laḥūm, al-Yaman, 147.
as he was, Aḥmad still had allies among the tribes in the north. The imām’s position was also strengthened by the standing of his opponent. The al-Aḥmar family was, as they had always been, king-makers but never kings. They were a tribal family not *sayyids*. Typically, a revolt would have been led by an imāmic challenger, not a tribal shaykh. Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar might overthrow Aḥmad, but he could never replace him. How much the lack of a specific replacement for Aḥmad hurt the al-Aḥmars’ rebellion is unclear, but it did allow Aḥmad to do what he had always done so incredibly well: play one shaykh off against the other. In December and January, Aḥmad reached out to a number of tribal shaykhs in the north and won them over to his side. Ḥamīd realized the extent of the opposition as he moved through the northern highlands with a contingent of tribal fighters. He was turned away from one village in ‘Amrān and then another, where he was forced to retreat in the face of gunfire.\(^{78}\)

Ḥamīd eventually took refuge with some shaykhs in al-Jawf, who refused to allow the imām’s soldiers to arrest him. The soldiers pressed Ḥamīd to turn himself over to them, but the young tribal leader refused, saying he would agree to accompany them only if the “shaykhs and notables” of al-Jawf agreed to vouch for his safety.\(^{79}\) A common practice in Yemen, where local leaders were often responsible for security in their areas, the shaykhs in al-Jawf assured Ḥamīd that he had their guarantee. Some, such as Douglas and others, have argued that Aḥmad granted Ḥamīd a guarantee of safety and then violated that code by having him arrested. What actually seems to have happened, based in part on an account by Ḥamīd’s younger brother, was that Ḥamīd was indeed given a guarantee, but never by Aḥmad. It was the tribal shaykhs and notables in al-Jawf who granted the guarantee. Still, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Aḥmad wasn’t above breaking protocol when it came to the al-Aḥmar family. In his memoirs

\(^{78}\) Ahmar, *Mudḥakkirāt*, 61.

Ḥamīd’s younger brother, ‘Abdullāh, suggests that the imām was ignorant of the guarantee and explicitly refused to give his own to Ḥamīd.\textsuperscript{80} But it is unclear as to whether this was willful ignorance or something else. Whatever the case, the result was the same. Ḥamīd was taken into custody at Sukhna, and while Aḥmad’s honor may have technically remained pure the shaykhs in al-Jawf believed that theirs had been violated. The repercussions from this would ripple out over the next decade with serious consequences for the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. Days later, following a last minute appeal by Ḥusayn, Aḥmad executed both father and son.

The rebellion ended with those two deaths. Ḥusayn and Ḥamīd were dead and the rest of their allies fled the country for the safety of British protection in the south. But Aḥmad may also have doomed his son with his shocking break with Yemeni tribal custom. ‘Abdullāh bin Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar escaped the fate of his father and brother and at 27-years-old soon found himself elected as \textit{shaykh-mashāyikh} of the Ḥāshid tribal confederation. ‘Abdullāh would go on to become a staunch Republican and one of the fiercest fighters in the war that followed Aḥmad’s death.

The execution of the two al-Aḥmars was a turning point in Yemen’s imāmic history. Aḥmad had executed opponents previously, including several prominent figures such as members of the al-Wazīr family following the assassination of his father in 1948. But neither Ḥusayn or Ḥamīd had been involved in an attempt to kill the imām. In fact, Ḥamīd had stood literally shoulder-to-shoulder with Aḥmad during the attempted coup in 1955.\textsuperscript{81} In his memoir, however, al-Aḥmar neglects to explain why Ḥamīd was with Imām Aḥmad, mentioning only that his brother “opposed” the coup. This is true, but it leaves out – as al-Aḥmar frequently does throughout his memoir – important information. Ḥamīd was in Ta’izz as part of what is often

\textsuperscript{80} Aḥmar, \textit{Mudhakkirāt}, 63.
\textsuperscript{81} Aḥmar, \textit{Mudhakkirāt}, 53.
referred to as the hostage system, a practice by which the imams kept tribal shaykhs in line by maintaining guardianship over a son or relative. The “hostages” (raḥāʾīn) were typically treated well, or at least no worse than other dignitaries. One indication of the freedom of movement “hostages” like Ḥamīd enjoyed under Imām Aḥmad was the close friendship that developed between Ḥamīd and al-Badr. Still, in his late twenties, Ḥamīd was relatively old to still be living at court in Taizz. One can only guess at Aḥmar’s decision to elide this information. But the most likely reason is to retrospective reading of history that allows him to present his family as loyal to the imām until Aḥmad broke that trust and executed both Ḥusayn and Ḥamīd. Aḥmar, of course, wrote his memoirs near the end of his life in the early 2000s as his family was once again coming under public scrutiny for their outsized public and political role.

The al-Aḥmar family was involved in an uprising sparked by Aḥmad’s attempt to recover the money al-Badr had paid out in 1959, but such uprisings were well within established practice in Yemen and not something that was typically met with execution. The assassination plot the al-Aḥmars were involved in – the Sukhna plot – had yet to be put in motion when Ḥusayn and Ḥamīd were arrested. As he neared the end of his life, Aḥmad reacted more severely to lesser challenges than he ever had in the past. He didn’t spare Ḥusayn or Ḥamīd as he had many of the prisoners in Ḥajjah in 1948, nor did he send them into exile as he had once done with Ḥusayn’s older brother. He simply put them to death, and in doing so he crossed a line. Within a year Aḥmad would be dead and his son, al-Badr, would have to pay the price for his imāmic overreach.
This chapter, like chapter two, narrows its focus from a broad overview of one imām’s reign to examine in detail a pivotal event, which changed the course of the country. Where chapter two looked at the 1948 coup and the Free Yemeni’s attempt to establish a constitutional imamate, chapter four examines the 1962 coup, which overthrew the imāmate, sparked a civil war, and led to the establishment of the republic. The differences between these two coups, which on the surface look remarkably similar, are instrumental to understanding why Yemeni history has developed the way it has, why the 1962 coup succeeded and the 1948 one failed, and why the imāmate was abolished and the Republic was established. Both 1948 and 1962 began as palace coups, which attempted to assassinate the sitting imām. But the goals of each coup differed. In 1948, the goal was to reform the imamate by getting rid of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, which had become a dynastic monarchy, and establish a constitution that would be binding on all future imāms. This, as we saw in chapter 2, failed and many of the plotters were executed. The coup in 1962 had different goals. Instead of seeking to reform the imāmate, it wanted to abolish the office and in its place establish a republic along the lines of what Nasser and the Free Officers had brought about in Egypt. In this, as we will see, the plotters, who soon took to calling themselves “Republicans” – in opposition to “Royalists” – were at least partially successful.¹ They did overthrow the imāmate, but the republic they founded was something different than what they had imagined. What accounts for the change of goals from 1948 to 1962, and why did the latter succeed where the former had failed? Building off the arguments in

¹ The Arabic term commonly used for Royalist – malakiyyūn – is I believe instructive. As we may recall from chapter 1, Imām Yahyā’s use of the term “kingdom” in a treaty with Italy had sparked anger and outrage among Zaydī scholars who saw the imamate as something different from a kingdom. By 1962 and in the civil war that followed that sense has disappeared and the Royalists themselves self-described as “malakiyyūn.”
chapter three, which examined the rule of Imām Aḥmad, chapter four looks at the events of September 26, 1962, the chaos and the confusion, and the battle for Ṣan‘ā’, especially the fight for the armory and the treasury, which as we saw in examining the events of 1955 and 1959 in chapter three, are key levers of power in mid-twentieth century Yemen. The actions of al-Badr are contrasted with those of his father in 1948, as well as his own in 1959. This chapter argues that while al-Badr made some mistakes, such as being passive at times, he was also hurt by the prevalence of the radio in Yemen at the time, which continues an argument on the power of technology that was introduced in chapter one. The plotters seized the radio station on the night of the coup, announcing the new republic, which in effect reduced the amount of time al-Badr had to react and respond to the coup, which is in sharp contrast to the time his father had to react to similar events in 1948. This chapter also examines the actions of al-Sallāl, and contrasts those with the decisions al-Wazīr made in 1948 as a way of explaining why the coup in 1962 succeeded.

The middle section of this chapter examines Egyptian involvement in the 1962 coup. This section lays the groundwork for arguments that will be made in chapter six about the importance of outside assistance for the Republicans. Most notably, this chapter argues that Nasser did not make one decision to intervene in Yemen, instead he made a number of small decisions that led to intervention. Chapter four also examines the role of Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Āḥmar and how important his assistance and support, which were broadcast over the radio, was in the early days of the coup. The 1962 coup, unlike the 1948 one, was led by military officers as opposed to the tribal or religious elite who had led the earlier one. This difference in leadership also meant a change in outlook. Along with the changes in technology and the new intellectual currents of socialism and Arab nationalism, the fact that the 1962 coup was headed by military officers also
helps explain why it didn’t seek to simply reform the imāmate. In 1948, the Free Officers revolution in Egypt had not taken place but by 1962 it was already a decade in the past, and a model to be emulated. Unlike the tribal and religious elite in Yemen, when the military officers looked for a precedent for their coup against the imām, they didn’t look backwards into Yemeni history, which had one imām replacing another, instead they looked to their counterparts in Egypt and Iraq, where military officers had overthrown monarchs and established republics. Indeed the template of a military coup – more than the attempt to establish a constitutional imāmate in 1948 – is what happened in Yemen in 1962. But unlike in Egypt or Iraq, in Yemen the military still needed the support of the tribal and religious elite, which is why al-Aḥmar’s backing and his public radio address supporting al-Sallāl as well as the backing of al-Zubayrī and al-Iryānī was so important, transforming what had happened on September 26, 1962 from a coup to a revolution.

One of the difficulties for the contemporary historian of Yemen is separating fact from fiction when it comes to the night of September 26, 1962. September 26 is modern Yemen’s Genesis moment, the beginning from which everything else followed, and as such it is at the heart of multiple, and competing, narratives and conceptions about the revolution, what happened and what it means. Modern attempts at Arabic historiography have been plagued by similar problems. Histories of the revolution written and published in Yemen often begin by

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2 Indeed it is worth noting that while military takeovers of the state were taking place around the Arab world, Yemen was the only case where this took place on the Arabian Peninsula. One obvious difference, of course, is Yemen’s relative lack of oil wealth in comparison to the countries who would later form the Gulf Cooperation Council.

describing a battle between good and evil, light and darkness in which the al-Badr and the
imāmate are described as evil incarnate while the plotters in the military are unflinching heroes.
Such a bifurcated world, of course, misses much of the nuance of that night and serves most
notably as a foundation upon which the modern state and successive regimes have built their
narrative of rightful rule. This retrospective slanting of the historical record for contemporary
political purposes has created serious problems for historians. The basic facts of the night,
however, are not in question.

On September 26, 1962, one week after Imām Aḥmad died in his sleep in Ta‘izz, military
officers in Ṣan‘ā’ attempted to assassinate his son and successor, Muḥammad al-Badr. That
attempt failed when the assassin’s gun misfired. Al-Badr managed to escape the palace – one
story has him sliding down a bathroom chute – and found refuge with a supporter before
sneaking out of the city and heading north to Ḥajjah, where his father had retreated in the wake
of the attempted coup in 1948. That was the beginning of what Yemenis would come to call al-
thawra, the revolution, and the eight-year civil war that followed. As we saw in chapters two
and three, various opposition groups in Yemen had been trying for years to overthrow or kill one
of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn imāms and replace him with someone else, someone more pliable and eager
to reform. All of their attempts, however – in 1948, 1955, 1959, and 1961 – had centered on
replacing an imām, never on replacing the imāmate. But within a year of the final attempt on
Imām Aḥmad in 1961, which we looked at in chapter three, that calculation had changed. Why
was 1962 different? This rather simple question opens a window on the changing dynamics in
Yemen as well as the region. After all, only three years earlier, al-Badr had been the choice of
most reform-minded figures in Yemen. Why was he now being attacked and targeted for

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revolution brought Yemen out of the “middle ages”. Maḥmūd Āmīn al-‘Ālm, “Maḥmūd Āmīn al-‘Ālm wa Thawrat
killing? A large part of this was Aḥmad’s execution of Ḫusayn al-Aḥmar and his eldest son Ḫamīd. This incident is often pointed to as a case of imāmī overreach that helped undermine al-Badr’s rule before it even began by alienating the head of one of Yemen’s two powerful tribal confederations. Indeed, Ḫusayn’s son and Ḫamīd’s younger brother, ʿAbdullāh, would go on to head the confederation and was, throughout the war, a staunch Republican. But even more important than the execution was the way it was carried out: under a tribal guarantee (even if not given by Aḥmad) and for a relatively small offense, certainly not one that justified capital punishment. A related issue was also at play, Yemen’s domestic context had changed since Yahyā’s day and even since Aḥmad had taken over in 1948. Egypt had overthrown its own king, and what had previously been unimaginable was now not only possible but almost expected. The world had opened up to Yemen, and the imāmate was no longer the only form of government conceivable. Both transistor radios and travel abroad by students and soldiers helped contribute to this gradual opening, as did incoming visitors who arrived in Yemen as doctors, military trainers and diplomats. This two-way traffic changed Yemen significantly and in ways that were not always well understood by the imām and his advisers. How and why this happened is the primary focus of this chapter. A second related question is also introduced: Why did Egypt respond so quickly?

This chapter, the final one of part one, is a culmination of the three that preceded it, the climax of Yemen’s transformation throughout the first half of the twentieth century. This quartet

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4 At a conference held in the early 1980s, a group of Yemeni scholars and participants traced the country’s republican roots back as early as 1935. See Thawra 26 september: dirāsāt wa shahādāt lil-tarīkh, Dar al-ʿAwda, Beirut: 1987, 2nd printing, p. 136. One of the speakers, Yemeni poet ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Maqālīḥ, attributes this republican claim to an Italian writer as a way of conferring legitimacy on the view, showing it isn’t just Yemeni Republicans who believe this. Much of the conference was essentially a repackaging of the revolution to retrospectively smooth out the difference between various republican factions. For instance, the book itself is dedicated to ʿAbdullāh al-Sallāl, Yemen’s first president who was overthrown in a coup in 1967 and spent much of his later life in exile.

5 This question will be dealt with more fully in chapter 6, which focuses on foreign involvement in the Yemeni civil war.
of chapters – Yahyā’s reign, the failed coup of 1948, Aḥmad’s reign, and the successful coup of 1962 – explain how Yemen moved from an imāmate to a dynastic monarchy to a republic. That process was often bumpy and haphazard; only in retrospect does a pattern emerge.

**The Coup**

Hours after Imām Aḥmad passed away at his palace in Ta’izz, Muḥammad al-Badr announced the death and his own succession. Only two generations removed from Yahyā, his paternal grandfather, al-Badr’s *daʿwa* of 1962 was in sharp contrast to Yahyā’s in 1904. At the beginning of the twentieth century the *daʿwa* had still been a contested act that required a the acknowledgment/approval from the *ahl al-ḥall waʿl-ʿaqd*, now it was a mere formality with a pro forma response. There was never any doubt who would be imām after Aḥmad. Aḥmad had succeeded his father, and now al-Badr would succeed Aḥmad. Hereditary succession, which had been opposed in theory if not always in practice, had become institutionalized. Al-Badr had sought and received the pledge of the ‘*ulama* in private before announcing his father’s death. No one else was even considered, at least by Aḥmad. In more than fifty years of rule, his father and grandfather had successfully weakened potential rivals for the imāmate to the point that al-Badr’s only real competition came from within the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. And even there, Aḥmad had taken steps to ensure his son’s succession, making sure the most obvious challenger, his younger brother, Ḥasan, remained in New York as Yemen’s ambassador to the UN. When Aḥmad died in Ta’izz, al-Badr was in Ṣanʿā and his uncle Ḥasan was thousands of miles away in New York. In the final years of his life Aḥmad had alienated so many different segments of Yemeni society, including powerful families in the Ḥāshid and Bakīl confederations, that

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7 The posting was little more than a soft exile, and it was seen as such by Ḥasan, the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, and most political observers within Yemen. But Ḥasan, unlike al-Badr, was a man of significant personal status and charisma, he had run Ṣanʿā after the 1948 coup and was widely seen as capable to al-Badr’s incompetence.
whoever followed him would have had to engage in an unprecedented amount of damage control in order to redress the web of grievances that ran throughout Yemen’s religious and tribal elite structures. Ḥasan likely couldn’t have prevented an uprising, but he may have been able to save the imāmate in a modified fashion, something like what the various opposition groups attempted to impose in 1948, a reformed and accountable imāmate. But Ḥasan never got that chance. He was in New York and al-Badr was in Ṣanʿā’. And it was al-Badr who was named the new imām, not his absent uncle.

The revolutionaries, of course, didn’t see it that way. To them al-Badr and Ḥasan were a united front, two sides of the same coins. In a first-person account of the events surrounding the coup, ‘Abdullāh al-Sallāl claims that al-Badr and Ḥasan “didn’t want to change anything.” He argues that the pair, and really anyone that might have come to power from the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, would have continued in the path set out by Yaḥya and Aḥmad. This is an important, if self-serving, point, and it shows why a constitutional monarchy was no longer an option for the revolutionaries. They had lost hope in reform; Yaḥyā had been bad, Aḥmad had been worse. Of course, such a view also allowed al-Sallāl and the rest of the revolutionaries to argue that only a revolution would change things in Yemen.

Although there were various plots swirling around Ṣanʿā’ at the time, and a revolution likely would have happened anyway, al-Badr, just like in 1959, made a series of political missteps that hastened the end of the imāmate. Initially al-Badr, who took for himself the honorific title al-Manṣūr billāh, The Victorious by God, announced a series of reforms. He

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8 Wathāʾiq ālāʾ an al-thawra al-yamaniyya, Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-l-Buhūth al-Yamaniyya, Dar al-Ādāb, Beirut, 1992, pg. 53. This claim is rather strange coming from al-Sallāl, who was one of al-Badr’s primary confidants in the days leading up to the coup. Al-Sallāl knew that al-Badr and Ḥasan were not in close communication after Ahmad’s death, yet he portrays them as essentially two sides of the same coin. Of course, by doing so Sallāl and the rest of the revolutionaries could convince themselves that there was no possibility for reform from within the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family.
declared an amnesty for political prisoners, temporarily cancelled taxes and, most surprisingly, he announced a pay increase for the military.\(^9\) As we saw in chapter three, these are almost exactly the same steps he took in 1959, which led to a succession of troubles that culminated in Aḥmad’s hurried return from Rome and the execution of al-Badr’s friend and ally Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar as well as his father, the paramount shaykh of Ḥāshid, Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar. Ḥamīd’s younger brother, ‘Abdullāh, ended up in prison following the attempt on Aḥmad’s life in Sukhna.\(^10\) That Badr would make the same exact mistake three years later, only this time without his father to rescue him, speaks to several things, most notably his lack of political skill. This time the consequences of the mistake would be more far reaching and impossible to overturn.

In al-Badr’s accession speech, he welcomed “treaties and cordial relations with everyone.”\(^11\) That, in a nutshell, was al-Badr’s policy: pleasing everyone and offending no one. Al-Badr had always attempted to reconcile the irreconcilable in Yemen, portraying himself as a reformer and admirer of Nasser while remaining his father’s son and heir to the imāmate. His impossible balancing act almost came apart in 1959 and 1960, when he was forced to turn to Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar to put down a revolt in the military before eventually being rescued by his father. This time al-Badr was on his own. His political weakness and a real incapacity for leadership, as we will see in Part II, had serious consequences for the Royalist cause and their attempt to restore the imāmate. Just as in 1959, several advisers warned al-Badr against raising the salaries of the army. Yemen still didn’t have the money for a pay increase within the military. Compounding that mistake and making the country’s economic forecast even bleaker was al-Badr’s apparent off-the-cuff remark about temporarily abolishing taxes. Emptying Yemen’s

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prisons, no matter how much al-Badr desired it, would also be a mistake, creating more problems for the new ruler than it would solve. Some of this advice must have gotten through to the new ruler. Shortly after his speech al-Badr sent a telegraph to Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser in Egypt indicating that he intended to follow “in the footsteps of his father.” Nasser, who was still smarting over Ahmad’s snub in Port Said years earlier and his subsequent insulting poem, did not react well to what he took to be al-Badr’s impertinent telegram. Al-Badr hadn’t meant to offend; he was simply politically naïve. He had always admired Nasser and was hurt and confused by the Egyptian president’s cool response. Nasser cabled back, suggesting al-Badr form a “democratic government,” privileging no particular group. The picture that emerges of al-Badr during his first week as imām is that of a young man deeply unsure of himself, someone who was swayed by whomever spoke to him last. When self-styled reformers spoke to him, al-Badr made grandiose claims about the changes that he would make. When more traditional advisers warned him of the consequences of some of those decisions, al-Badr moved toward their end of the spectrum. The young imām was being pulled in several directions at once, and this tendency would continue to hobble the Royalists in the years to come. In the end, of course, this confusing and contradictory back-and-forth pleased no one. The reformers weren’t satisfied and neither were the traditionalists. Instead of pleasing everyone, Badr pleased no one.

Al-Badr’s Brief Reign

12 Wenner, Modern Yemen, 136.
14 This, of course, is to speak in general terms of only two of the multitude of groups in Yemen. But in those early days after Aḥmad’s death most of Yemen’s political power brokers were split between reform or a resumption of the imāmate as it had been practiced.
Just north of what would soon become known as Taḥrīr Square in Ṣan‘ā’ is Dār al-Bashā’ir, The Palace of Good Tidings, a four-story stone palace.\textsuperscript{15} Al-Badr had moved into the palace as crown prince, and like his father, he chose to remain in the palace he occupied as a prince after becoming imām. In 1948, Aḥmad moved the capital to Ta‘izz; fourteen years later his son and successor moved it back. Al-Badr made other changes as well. He named ‘Abdullāh al-Sallāl, the military officer who had spent time in Ḥajjah prison, the head of the ‘ukfa, the imāmic bodyguard, replacing the Zarānīq tribesmen who had been so loyal to his father. It would prove to be a fateful choice.

On the evening of September 26, al-Badr convened a cabinet meeting. The new imām, who had struggled with alcohol earlier in his life, liked to meet in the evening, sometimes working deep into the night and then sleeping late the next morning. Eleven men, including Sallāl, ‘Alī ‘Uthmān, and ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Iryānī, were present at Dār al-Bashā’ir that evening. They convened in a public room on the first floor, talking and chatting until about 11 pm.\textsuperscript{16} With al-Badr’s permission al-Sallāl left the palace as soon as the meeting ended. At the same time al-Sallāl left the palace a small convoy of tanks were moving through the darkened city toward Dār al-Bashā’ir. Dana Adams Schmidt, a \textit{New York Times} reporter who covered the war and later wrote a book about it, claims there were four separate plots that evening in Ṣan‘ā’: one headed by a Lieutenant named ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Mughnī, another led by al-Sallāl, a third by some of the Ḥāshid shaykhs, and a fourth within the Hamīd al-Dīn family.\textsuperscript{17} Yemeni historians and participants, of course, take a much different view on the events of that night, labeling what

\textsuperscript{17} Schmidt, \textit{The Unknown War}, 22.
Adams Schmidt called distinct plots as different threads of the same plan.\textsuperscript{18} It is unlikely that all four of Adams Schmidt’s different ‘plots’ were plots in the traditional sense. Some were little more than talk, and Adams Schmidt was reporting on events months after they had taken place and a narrative had already started to form.\textsuperscript{19}

‘Abdullāh al-Allāmar, Husayn’s second son and the paramount shaykh of Ḥāshīd, was still in prison, and the other shaykhs while eager to get revenge had done little to convert their anger into action. A similar situation held forth within the Hamīd al-Dīn family, where there was some anger at al-Badr’s accession of power. But Ḥasan, the most viable candidate from within the family, was thousands of miles away in New York. ‘Abd al-Mughnī had the desire, but he wasn’t in a position to put his plot into action. He didn’t control enough military assets to make a move against al-Badr. Only al-Sallāl had both the desire and the opportunity. He was close to al-Badr and he could, with the imām’s signature, move military hardware throughout the country. According to Muḥsin al-Jayyāsh, a lieutenant who participated in the coup, the basic plan was for several companies of soldiers to seize five key targets: the radio station, Dār al-Bashā’ir, the armory, the airport, and the electrical station.\textsuperscript{20}

After al-Sallāl and the rest of the men left the palace, al-Badr retreated upstairs to his private quarters. According to one account, his father-in-law and some servants followed him up the stairs.\textsuperscript{21} Near the top of the stairs a would-be assassin named Ḥusayn al-Sukrī attempted to shoot al-Badr, but the gun misfired and the imām ducked behind a door, escaping into another


\textsuperscript{19} Indeed what Adams Schmidt found, months after the event, may have been attempts by various groups to graft themselves onto the coup, which when Adams Schmidt was reporting looked to be successful.


\textsuperscript{21} Schmidt, \textit{The Unknown War}, 27.
room. Another member of the ‘ukfa fired back at Sukrī, wounding him. Around the same time, a tank driven by Muḥammad al-Sharāʿī, an officer loyal to al-Sallāl, moved through the city toward Dār al-Bashāʾir. The men in the tanks heard Sukrī’s shot and the returning fire, which was their cue to begin shelling the palace. Aware that he was under attack, al-Badr fled the palace – one story, decidedly unflattering, has him sliding down a bathroom chute to the street below – and eventually made his way to the homes of some supporters in Ṣanʿāʾ before sneaking out of the city and retreating north as his father had done in 1948. The tanks at Dār al-Bashāʾir kept up the shelling throughout the night. Even after al-Badr escaped and with only token fire from the palace, the tank crews still had difficulties, a sign both of how disorganized the plot was as well as the chaotic nature of coups. One group of soldiers had to return to Bāb al-Yaman and get a new armored car after crashing their previous one in the dark. By the time they made it back to Dār al-Bashāʾir, less than two miles away, they realized they had hardly any ammunition left and had to reverse course yet again and make their way back to the armory, which was under heavy attack, in the hopes of securing more munitions.

22 Interview Muḥsin Jayyāṣ in Thawra 26 Sibtimīr, vol. 2, Markaz al-Darāsāt wa-l-Buhūth al-Yamanī, Ṣanʿāʾ, 1987, p. 271. Jayyāṣ gives a detailed account of the three days leading up to the revolution and the distribution of ammunition and weapons. A television drama popular on Yemeni television places the shooter inside al-Badr’s bedroom, where strangely a western-looking woman – white skin and brown hair – in skimpy nightclothes is waiting for the imām. The only detail all variants of the story agree on is that the gun misfired.


24 Thawra 26 Sibtimīr, vol. 2, Markaz al-Darāsāt wa-l-Buhūth al-Yamanī, Ṣanʿāʾ, 1987, p. 247. According to Ḥusayn al-Dafī, both al-Sharāʿī and ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Mahābisī were killed in the attack, which indicates that there may have been more resistance from the palace than is usually assumed. The partially damaged upper floors of the palace are still visible today in downtown Ṣanʿāʾ.


26 Ḥāmid Muḥsin ‘Alī ‘Abbās in Thawrat 26 Sibtimīr, vol. 2, Markaz al-Darāsāt wa-l-Buhūth al-Yamanī, Ṣanʿāʾ, 1987, p. 456. Participants claim that they received returning fire all night, but other sources suggest that this was most likely token resistance from a handful of the ‘ukfa. And how long this shooting continued after the imām had escaped is unclear. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the fighting continued until sunrise as ‘Abbās claims.


A few blocks from Dār al-Bashā’ir another contingent of Republican soldiers attacked what was known as Dār al-Wuşūl, soon to be renamed the Republican Palace. In Şan‘ā’ the shelling and confusion continued throughout the night. Unaware that the imām had escaped, military units loyal to al-Sallāl continued to attack Dār al-Bashā’ir. More than a mile away at Bāb al-Yaman, the main gate into the city, guards who hadn’t been informed about the coup refused to open the gates to soldiers outside the city walls. A similar situation happened at the armory within the old city, where soldiers who were unaware of what was happening refused to yield when plotters came looking for guns and ammunition. In addition to ammunition, the armory – known as qaṣr al-silāḥ – was also part of a complex that held political prisoners. The fortress complex was at the base of Jabal Nuqm in the eastern part of the old city, and built on a slight incline. It was “huge,” one of the soldiers tasked with controlling it for the revolution remembered years later in a memoir. The size of the complex exacerbated the confusion, as few soldiers were able to ascertain what was happening in other parts of the armory let alone in the rest of the city.

Outside the armory the situation was just as confused, and few people knew exactly what was happening. It was after midnight and soldiers within the walls of the old city were running around while the sounds of tank shells and small arms echoed in the distance. And someone had
cut the electricity. In the dark buildings the various plots slowly congealed and merged together less out of any overarching plan than a gradual realization that they were all on the same side. Soldiers loyal to al-Sallāl slipped through the narrow alleyways outside Dār al-Bashā’ir as they moved toward the radio station. Next to the imām himself, the radio station was the most important target. If they could take it, they could control the message and announce what they had accomplished. The radio station itself fell with only minimal resistance to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Jaḥḥāf, ‘Alī Abū Lahūm and a small contingent of soldiers. The guards at the radio station stood aside as Jaḥḥāf and his men took control of the country’s only megaphone. The revolutionaries now had control of the narrative. Abū Lahūm read out the prepared statement, announcing that a coup had taken place and that the imām was dead. It would be weeks before anyone knew otherwise.

This, of course, was one of the major technological differences between 1948 and 1962. When al-Wazīr and his allies assassinated Yaḥyā they had to rely on the telegraph to communicate the news. The telegraph was almost as fast, but it lacked the intimacy and power of the radio. There was something stunning about the message that Abū Lahūm read out that night, a message that could be heard throughout Yemen and was soon transmitted to the rest of the world.

The First Republicans

Shortly after the fajr prayer the next morning, September 27, al-Sallāl met ‘Abd al-Latīf Ḍayf Allāh and several other officers at the military college, which they were using as a

33 Muḥammad al-Qādrī in “Thawrat 26 Sibtimbir, vol. 2, Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-l-Buhūth al-Yamanī, Ṣan‘ā’, 1987, p. 275. Qādrī who was part of the team tasked with taking the armory appears to have no knowledge of the fact that the electrical station was a target of another team of revolutionaries. Whether this was an attempt at operational security or simple confusion and incompetence is unclear.

34 Abū Lahūm, al-Yaman, 339.
command center, to assess the situation in Ṣan‘ā’.

The radio was reporting that al-Badr had been killed, although his body had still not been found. But al-Sallāl’s first priority was re-establishing control within the military. For all the successes of the night before – mostly running the imām out of the palace – there was still no guarantee that the coup would be successful. After all, in 1948, al-Wazīr had held Ṣan‘ā’ for 33 days before he was ousted. Al-Sallāl needed the military strongly behind him. He established a High Military Council, naming himself head of the council. But the bigger problem, at least for the moment, was that he still needed munitions and money, and both of those were deep inside the armory, which his men had not yet been able to secure. Al-Sallāl asked Muḥammad al-Qādri and Ṣālih al-Rahabī to check on the situation at the armory and get control of the ammunition he knew he would need. The armory, the scene of some of the worst fighting from the night before, was still locked, but there were several small openings that had been blasted into the walls, where Qādri and Rahabī could squeeze inside. What they found was a lot of chaos and confusion. The man they needed, the storage manager, was at home and when they finally reached him on the phone he didn’t even appear to know there had been a coup.

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37 It is unclear if al-Sallāl was aware of this at the time, but in addition to needing a strong army to defeat any of the imām’s supporters, he also needed assistance to make sure that tribal allies and potential allies didn’t dominate the new state. Early on, in the hours after al-Badr fled, we already see one of the key struggles for the state and the republic. Was Yemen to be a tribally dominated state or one with a powerful central government? In many ways, this is still a question to be asked today.
39 Qādri, who claims he visited the armory the next morning, refers to these small openings as “farj.” Muḥammad al-Qādri in “Thawrat 26 Sibtimbiḥ, vol. 2, Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-l-Buhūth al-Yamanī, Ṣan‘ā’, 1987, p. 276. He also lists several officers who lost their lives in the fighting overnight.
“I need an order from Imām al-Badr,” he told Sallāl’s envoys.⁴⁰ The fact that the storage manager of the imām’s armory didn’t know there had been a coup after all the fighting and the radio message illustrates just how confusing this period of time was in Yemen, even for those living in Ṣanʿā’. No one quite knew what was happening. But at the critical juncture, al-Sallāl’s men had control of the radio station and the imām was in hiding and silent.

Qādārī and Rahabī finally managed to get the storerooms of ammunition open, freeing political prisoners as they went. For the rest of the morning, the pair sent ammunition and supplies across the city, dispatching single cars to deliver goods to troops in need.⁴¹ Complicating their task was the fact that the citadel in which the armory was located doubled as a bread distribution center for Ṣanʿā’s poor. Every morning people gathered outside the gates to receive an allotment of bread provided by the imām.⁴² Working with the master baker, Yaḥyā al-Jaʿdabī, Qādarī and Rahabī were able to double the amount of bread produced and avoid any disruption in service, but they still had to contend with a confused crowd looking for food as the sun came up. This is one more thing the plotters in 1962 learned from the failure of 1948. During the coup of 1948 the practice had been disrupted when al-Wazīr came to power, which sparked a great deal of frustration among many who had come to depend on the daily delivery of bread. Qādarī wanted to ensure that something similar didn’t happen in 1962. One is struck here, as in so many other accounts of the night of revolution, by how soldiers loyal to Sallāl were able to co-opt the imāmic infrastructure to make sure that life continued with as few disruptions as possible. This, of course, begs the question: what exactly did a republican revolution mean in

⁴² The bread is known as kidam in Yemen and the practice of distributing it daily outside the armory had been a long established practice. See: Muḥammad al-Qādārī in “Thawrat 26 Sibtimbir, vol. 2, Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-l-Buhūth al-Yamanī, Ṣanʿā’, 1987, p. 277.
this context? Could average Ṣanʿānīs understand what a republic/military government meant, or did they simply see it as another change in leadership, an imāmate without an imām?

Another, more pressing problem soon presented itself for al-Sallāl and the rest of the new military leadership in Ṣanʿā’, who were scrambling to consolidate control: what to do with the rank-and-file of Yemen’s two military branches? Under the imām, Yemen’s military was split between the regular army, al-jaysh al-nizāmī, and the irregulars, al-jaysh al-barrānī. The regular army numbered an estimated 15,000 at the time. This was the supposedly “modern” branch of the army, which had been formed in the 1930s under Yahyā and whose officers had trained abroad in Baghdad and Cairo. This was also the branch that received specialized sessions from visiting Egyptian officers under both Ḍḥmad and al-Badr. The irregulars, which one scholar describes as “the traditional army of the imām,” was typically comprised of tribesmen who were commanded by their tribal shaykh. In this case, the irregulars at the armory were from Ahnūm, a tribe from the northern highlands. Qādarī, who provides one of the few first-person accounts from the armory on the night of the coup, makes it clear that while he was wary of the irregular tribesmen they did little to stand in the way of the revolutionaries. Again one is struck by how easily the coup could have fallen apart in the first few hours had the tribesmen from Ahnūm come to a different decision and elected to fight Qādarī and the rest of the revolutionaries. That they didn’t, at least in the moment, speaks to tribal caution as well as the fact that no one was actively opposing al-Sallāl and Qādarī. It was a one-sided fight, and the imām was nowhere to be found. Had al-Badr elected to stand and fight the whole affair might have gone differently.

45 Ahnūm was where Yahyā was based when he heard his father, Imām Ṭanṣūr, had slipped into a coma.
Two days later some of the tribesmen from Ahnūm came to believe they had made a mistake in not opposing Qādarī and the rest of the revolutionaries. On September 27, the day after the coup, al-Sallāl visited the armory to observe the situation for himself. He congratulated Qādarī on all he had done, and gave him a battlefield promotion, which came with the promise of a salary increase. This, of course, was the same strategy of buying support that al-Badr had tried to implement in 1959 and 1962. The difference is that al-Sallāl seems to have used it strategically. Instead of issuing blanket pay raises, he gave them only to key individuals. “You’re in charge,” al-Sallāl informed Qādarī as he motored away from the citadel and back to his temporary headquarters at the military college. Qādarī, who had been dispatched to the armory to ensure Republican control of munitions, now found himself in command of the entire complex. One of the first items on his agenda was payment for the military. He offered the regular army 20 riyals a man, and the irregulars 10 riyals each. Predictably, the tribesmen complained that half wages in comparison to the regular army was “unjust.” Qādarī refused to budge, telling the tribesmen he would pay them the same as the regulars if they agreed to join the regulars. This conflict over payment is one that would bedevil and be exploited by all sides in the coming years as tribes operated less as part of a central state than individual autonomous units, who looked out for their own sovereign interests. Attempts to treat tribes, particularly those in north Yemen, as part of the state often leads to mistaken analysis. They were in Yemen, not of Yemen. The role of the tribes within Yemen obviously beg the questions as to what type of state Yemen was at the time. It certainly was not a state in the sense of having a central

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decision making body. Instead, both under the imams and later in the Republic, tribes would often be treated as semi-autonomous units, capable of making their own decisions independent of the government and, more importantly, contributing fighters as parts of tribal militias.51

The scene was just as confused elsewhere in the country. At the airport in Ta`izz soldiers with Republican tendencies listened to the radio with a growing sense of trepidation.52 Ahmad had only been dead a week and he still had supporters among the militias stationed in town. Relying on Radio Ṣan‘ā’ for breaking news during the coup was challenging. The men in Ta`izz knew something was happening, but it wasn’t until 7 am the next morning when they heard the announcement of the Yemen Arab Republic that they deemed it safe to act.53 They detained anyone they thought might be supporters of al-Badr, who at the time they believed to be dead, or the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. And like the plotters in Ṣan‘ā’, the soldiers in Ta`izz rushed to take control of the armory and the storehouses of weapons and ammunition. Along with the radio and treasury, control of the armory was a key goal. Al-Wazīr had managed to control both the treasury and armory in 1948, but he never fully utilized either. Al-Sallāl wouldn’t make the same mistake, he used the money to shore up his support and made sure his men had enough weapons and ammunition to hold on to their gains.54

In Ṣan ‘ā’, ‘Abdullah al-Baṣāwī was in charge of securing the airport for al-Sallāl and the Republicans.55 He had ordered all planes grounded, which wasn’t as disruptive as it might have

51 The most recent examples of this are the tribes in Yemen which have issued a call to arms (nafīr) in response to the Saudi attack on a funeral hall in Ṣan‘ā’ in October 2016. See, “Qaba’il bani ḫarrith tu ‘lin al-nafīr al-‘āmi,” www.almotamer.net, November 1, 2016. Available at: http://www.almotamar.net/news/133193.htm
54 Although many of Ahmad’s opponents had believed the imam had a vast storehouse of gold and treasure prior to the revolution, they soon realized exactly how troubled Yemen’s state finances were.
been as Yemen had only a few working aircraft and those only flew after receiving direct permission from the imām. Unlike the radio station, the airport was largely symbolic, although that would change over the course of the war. Al-Baṣāwī’s job was defensive, al-Sallāl instructed him to seize anyone from the royal family and prevent the imām’s supporters from escaping Ṣan‘ā’ by the airport road.\(^{56}\) Al-Sallāl and the Republicans had learned from previous failed coups. In 1948, Aḥmad became dangerous when he left Ta‘izz ahead of the assassins. The imām and the rest of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes could be handled if they were contained within Ṣan‘ā’ and Ta‘izz, where anti-Ḥamīd al-Dīn sympathy was strongest. It was only when the royal family got outside of the cities and into the northern highlands, where their support was strongest, that they became dangerous. This was where Aḥmad had retreated in 1948, and where al-Badr fled in 1959. And, as we will see, this is once again where al-Badr went to regroup.

**Egypt’s Involvement**

Within days of the coup the first Egyptian troops arrived in Ṣan‘ā’.\(^{57}\) Initially, Nasser and his newly formed Presidential Council seemed to believe that the coup in Yemen would follow the pattern of their own coup ten years earlier: an unpopular monarch deposed and a group of military officers taking control of the apparatus of the state. But the parallels were far from exact. Al-Sallāl was not Nasser or even Muḥammad Naguib, nor was Yemen in any sense Egypt. The latter’s rural, agrarian economy revolved around the industrial and cultural capital of Cairo, while Yemen was a tribal, mountainous and deeply divided country. In Egypt seizing the apparatus of the state gave one control of the country, while in Yemen one could take control of the main cities and their principal buildings but there was no state as such to seize. In Yemen,

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\(^{57}\) The exact date of the arrival, as with so many events in Yemen in late September 1962, is unclear. As Jesse Ferris writes in his book on Egypt’s involvement in the war: “Both Egyptian and Yemeni chronicles of the war suffer from a propensity for chronological imprecision.” See, Ferris, *Nasser’s Gamble*, 50, fn. 79.
both under the Ḥamīd al-Dīn imams and later under ʿAlī ʿAbdullāh Ṣālīḥ the state was personalized system of rule in which the figure at the top – be he an imām or a president – made the decisions that befitted him best at the moment. This was true whether it was Yaḥyā contravening Zaydī norms to ensure that Aḥmad succeeded him, or Ṣālīḥ manipulating Yemen’s oft re-written constitution to stand for re-election in 2006, an election he had frequently stated he would not enter.58

Ever since the breakup of the United Arab States in 1961, Nasser’s Ṣawt al-ʿArab had directed increasingly vitriolic statements at the imāmate in Yemen. Many of these criticisms, however, had focused on Aḥmad personally.59 When he died, Nasser and his closest advisers seemed unsure whether to continue with the propaganda attacks this time focused on al-Badr, or ease off and give the new imām space and time. After all, al-Badr had always enjoyed good relations with Nasser, counting the Egyptian leader as a personal friend and role model. Al-Badr’s telegraph to Nasser, stating that he would “follow in the footsteps of his father” and along with Nasser’s reflexive urge to help Republican revolutionaries, settled the debate in Egypt. On September 21, Nasser had ordered a halt to Ṣawt al-ʿArab’s attacks on the imāmate.60 Two days later, on September 23, Nasser sent his official condolences to which al-Badr responded.61 And then on September 25, Ṣawt al-ʿArab issued what Ferris calls “one last fateful transmission.”62 The coup took place the next night.

Prior to the coup Egypt’s ambassador in Ṣan‘ā’ had been in contact with individuals from the various plots, but he does not seem to have known that al-Sallāl was about to make his move.

58 For more on Ṣālīḥ’s decision see Gregory D. Johnsen, “The Election Yemen Was Supposed to Have,” Middle East Report Online, October 3, 2006. Available here: http://www.merip.org/mero/mero100306
59 Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 50.
60 Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 50.
62 Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 50. Ferris may be slightly overstating the case here. It is unlikely that the September 25 transmission spurred Sallāl and the other officers to act. They would have moved regardless of whether Ṣawt al-ʿArab attacked al-Badr or not.
The coup, when it took place, was a Yemeni affair inspired by an Egyptian example. Nasser didn’t control the pre-planning nor did he know ahead of time when it would take place. All he knew was that several Yemeni officers wanted to topple the regime, and for much of the past decade, in fits and starts, Nasser had been encouraging them to act. But when al-Sallāl finally did put the plan in motion, the timing still came as a surprise to Nasser and he had to make a quick decision when al-Sallāl cabled for help.

Nasser was well aware of the differences between Egypt and Yemen. Indeed, some in his inner circle wanted to avoid sending any troops. As Jesse Ferris has shown in his discussion of Egyptian politics and policy, in the months and weeks leading up to the coup in Ṣan‘ā’ “direct intervention appears on the face of it to have been the least likely response.” Yet despite his own worries and that of his staff, Nasser and Egypt did intervene directly and, as the months went by, ever more deeply. There are several factors behind the decision to intervene but three primary ones stand out and, during the course of the debate, played off and influenced each other.

First, although Egyptian policy and its military had not been inclined toward a direct intervention in Yemen or any country for that matter, Nasser’s decision to intervene constituted nevertheless a continuation of his public political posture. When al-Sallāl needed help, Nasser was the obvious choice. There was a decade of history behind the cable. Egypt had been hosting Yemeni officers for years, and throughout the 1950s, largely at al-Badr’s insistence, Egyptian training delegations had been arriving in Ṣan‘ā’. The road to intervention and sending troops to Yemen didn’t have to be blazed; it already existed. Nasser’s initial decision to send a plane with

63 Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 37. Italics in the original.
Yemeni exiles, some Egyptian officers, gold, arms and a radio transmitter would have been a natural, almost “reflexive” action.64

This reflexive decision then led to a second, slightly more difficult decision: sending active-duty troops to Yemen, which Nasser did days later. The 100 commandos Nasser dispatched within days of the coup touches on the second reason for intervention: ambition. In 1961 Egypt’s union with Syria had collapsed, followed soon after by Imām ʿAbd al-Ḥaṭīb’s insulting poem, which effectively ended what was left of the United Arab States. In what Malcom Kerr called the “Arab Cold War” Nasser and Egypt were lined up against Saudi Arabia, the Arab world’s most powerful monarchy. Although Nasser may not have articulated this in Presidential Council debates, some evidence suggests he saw Yemen as a road to Saudi Arabia. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Hadīdī, Egypt’s chief of military intelligence, claims that the reason for Egyptian troops in Yemen was to put a credible military threat on Saudi Arabia’s southern border.65 By sending a minimal number of troops to Yemen, Nasser hoped to bring about the maximum amount of change in the Middle East. Reality, of course, turned out to be somewhat different. But in the fall of 1962, Nasser must have felt as though, at long last, he was on the cusp of seeing his dream for a renewed Middle East about to come to fruition. The third factor behind the increasing intervention was what is often called “mission creep.” Military actions often take on a momentum all their own, one decision begets another in a long line of incremental choices that on their own do little but taken together can often lead far afield from the original objectives.

64 Cited in Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 50. Ferris pushes back, and rightly, against the “reflex” argument that holds Egypt’s intervention was unavoidable predetermined by its previous actions. While this argument is not sufficiently determinative, it is not without some merit even while not explaining everything.

65 Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 60. Ferris dismisses this as being unrealistic, correctly pointing out that the few soldiers sent in the early months of the war would have presented little threat to the Saudi monarchy. On the face of it, this is true. But it is more likely that Nasser saw these troops as inspirational. That is by their very presence in Yemen they would inspire action in Saudi Arabia, acting as what today some would call “force multipliers.” What makes this an even more intriguing avenue of inquiry is that this theory would require Nasser to see himself as the “force multiplier.” The Egyptian troops were his representatives on the Arabian Peninsula, and much of the past decade had led Nasser to see himself as someone capable of inspiring great actions in others.
Egyptian intelligence appears to have had a good handle on the situation within Ṣanʿā’, but it knew little of the Yemeni highlands. And unlike in Egypt, where controlling Cairo meant controlling the country, Ṣanʿā’ was only one center among many. By unconsciously importing political and conceptual frameworks shaped by their homeland, Egyptian intelligence agents conflated Ṣanʿā’ with Yemen. This led to mistakes of intelligence and subsequently to mistakes of policy based on bad intelligence. Nasser and his agents didn’t expect the strong tribal reaction to the announcement of a republic. Nothing in their experience with Yemen or Yemenis had prepared them for such an event. Egypt had worked with soldiers who came for training abroad and exiled intellectuals and politicians. In Yemen, Egyptian intelligence mainly interacted with individuals who came to Ṣanʿā’, and that was a self-selecting group that mostly supported, or came to support, Nasser’s vision/ideology. The Egyptians had little experience with the tribes. They didn’t train the *al-jaysh al-barrānī*, and they didn’t venture into the highlands. The rugged mountains in northern Yemen were a blank map for the Egyptian military.

Nasser never made one decision to intervene in Yemen, he made a series of incremental decisions that he believed would bring about what he wanted to see most: republican regimes on the Arabian Peninsula. Within months of the coup in Ṣanʿā’ there were an estimated 15,000 Egyptian soldiers in Yemen. A far cry from the handful of officers and commandos he originally sent. The number would only grow from there. Each time Nasser approved an additional surge of troops he would find that he needed to approve one more and then another in order to achieve the victory that kept slipping farther away.

**The Reaction Abroad**

Imām Aḥmad’s domestic opponents, many of whom were in exile, expressed none of the hand wringing and debates that Nasser and his inner circle endured. The man they had been
opposing for years, the man who had survived so many assassination attempts, was dead. “Impossible,” one exile in Aden said when he heard the news.66 That reaction of shock and disbelief slowly gave way to one of expectation. What did this mean for them and Yemen’s future, the exiles in places like Aden and Cairo wondered? And what about their friends in the imām’s prisons, would they be released? Should they themselves return home?

In Aden the exiles gathered around Sinān Abū Lāḥūm, a shaykh from Bakīl, and Aḥmad al-Sayāghī, a former imāmate official. Both men had fled south to the umbrella of British protection following the failed Sukhna plot. In Aden they were close to home but beyond Aḥmad’s reach. For more than a decade, since the failed coup in 1948, Yemen’s religious and tribal elite had spearheaded the opposition movement, planning and organizing most of the attempts on the life of the imām. But at the critical moment when the imām died, many of these leaders were outside of the country. Aḥmad had done such an effective job of neutralizing and eliminating many of the religious and tribal elite that there was no longer a critical mass of them left in Yemen. Al-Zubayrī and Nuʿmān were in Cairo, Abū Lāḥūm, Sayāghī and a host of others were in Aden, and men like ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar were in prison.

These intellectual and tribal elites were tied to the existing system in a way that military officers, who often came from lower social classes, were not.67 This meant that when they had sought change or reform they did so within the existing framework of the imāmate. That was what they knew, and that local history shaped their worldview as well as how they approached issues such as modernization and political reform. Military officers such as al-Sallāl, while growing up in Yemen, were much less a part of the imāmic system; they were born into its

67 ‘Abdullāh al-Sallāl, for instance, came from a butcher family, a very low social status. Someone sayyids or other members of Yemen’s society (e.g., qudat (“judges”), tribesmen) would never have allowed their daughters to marry someone from the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy. But now a low status person would soon become head of state; Yemen’s social pyramid had been overturned in a violent and disorienting fashion for the Zaydī elites.
society’s lowest rungs and were not considered full members. Consequently, when al-Sallāl and officers like him looked for models of change, they didn’t turn to Yemeni history and the precedents of imāms replacing imāms, rather they looked to examples like Nasser and the Free Officer movement in Egypt, which overthrew a monarch.

Since 1948, the tribal and religious elites in Yemen had been in the forefront of the local opposition movement, but when Ahmad died in 1962 many of these men were dead, in prison, or in exile. This opened up political space for military officers, who had benefited from interactions with these elites and were starting to gain expertise and experience abroad, to take the lead. The change in leadership, broadly configured, also led to a change in outlook, with military officers looking to their counterparts in Egypt and Iraq as a template for what they wanted to accomplish in Yemen. Instead of simply trying to reform the system yet again, these military leaders destroyed it. With a few notable exceptions, the tribal, religious, and intellectual elites were on the outside looking in. Nonetheless in the hectic and confusing days of late September 1962 many of these men were so buoyed by enthusiasm and the apparent victory they had been seeking for so long that they made common cause with the officers, who now headed the new republic. This relationship, as we will see in chapters five, six, and seven, was not without its challenges. The men who planned and engineered the 1948 attempted coup, were not the ones who succeeded in 1962. The former had laid the groundwork, but the latter carried it out, and the two had different concepts of what the Yemeni state should look like.

**Technology and the Revolution**

As was mentioned earlier, the radio was an important technological advancement that helped spread the revolution. In Cairo and Beirut young Yemeni students heard the news on the radio, often reacting with joy and tears. Many of them, fans of Zubayrī and Yemen’s other great
poets, attempted to set down their feelings in verse. “We were so excited,” one young Yemeni in Cairo recalled. “We couldn’t wait to get home.”

At home in Yemen, people were finding out the same way. Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar heard the radio announcement. No one knew if it was true, he later wrote in his memoirs. That is Ṣawt al-‘Arab one official contended, not Radio Ṣan‘ā’. One week earlier Radio Ṣan‘ā’ had been broadcasting sorrowful music announcing the death of Imām Aḥmad, now the same radio waves were resounding with revolutionary anthems and hasty poetry. News of the revolution was confirmed the following day when al-Sallāl, who was already referring to himself as al-Raʾis, the president, sent a telegram to officials in al-Ḥībs, instructing them to release al-Aḥmar.

“Who is this Sallāl?” the official in charge asked. Like the manager of the armory in Ṣanʿā’, this confusion and uncertainty illustrates how fluid events in Ṣanʿā’ and the rest of Yemen were in late September 1962. Power was there for the taking and al-Sallāl was consolidating his control over the military while Imām al-Badr retreated north. This wasn’t 1948, when Aḥmad had the luxury of time. He could escape from Taʾīzz through Tihama and then up to Ḥajjah. The radio helped to change that. It compressed time, and gave al-Badr a smaller window in which to respond to the coup and al-Sallāl. The news of the 1962 coup spread quickly and as it did a narrative started to take hold, which had the imām dead and a republic in Ṣanʿā’. Not only was al-Badr in a weaker position than Aḥmad had been in 1948, but he also – because of the radio’s reach – had less time in which to react and respond.

During those first few nights Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar stayed up listening to the radio, trying to figure out what had happened and what he needed to do. With his father and his older brother dead, he was the paramount shaykh of Ḥāshid. But the only station he could pick up that

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68 al-Aḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 73.
69 al-Aḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 73 – 74.
night was the BBC out of London. Curiously, al-Aḥmar claims in his memoir that at some point that night the BBC reported that al-Badr had escaped from the rubble of Dār al-Bashā’ir. While this is possible – many things get reported in the initial hours of breaking news – the news that al-Badr had escaped would not become public knowledge for several weeks. The morning after he was released from prison, al-Aḥmar set off on a tour of the north, an apparent effort to ascertain the mood of the various tribes in the Ḥashid confederation before arriving in Ṣan‘ā’ on September 29. The confusion of the first few days meant that there were no cars that Aḥmar could take into Ṣan‘ā’. Instead he had to hitch a ride on a military truck transporting supplies to the new Republican regime in the capital. Al-Aḥmar immediately met with al-Sallāl in the new president’s office at al-‘Urdī. Al-Zubayrī arrived the next morning on what was apparently the first Egyptian plane to arrive in Ṣan‘ā’ after the coup. Together the three men represented Yemen’s tribal, intellectual/religious, and military factions; the military may have carried out the coup but the other two groups, as represented by al-Aḥmar and al-Zubayrī, were ready to support them. The support of al-Aḥmar and al-Zubayrī was key in transforming what had been a palace coup carried out by the military into a real revolution.

Al-Aḥmar explained to the new president that he wanted to talk to al-Zubayrī and ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Iryānī to coordinate a response. In his memoirs, however, al-Aḥmar is silent on the substance of his conversation with al-Zubayrī and al-Iryānī. Was he on the fence about

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70 al-Aḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 74. It is unclear why al-Aḥmar could not find Radio Ṣan‘ā’, whether it was off the air, or didn’t have the wattage to reach him, or whether it was something else entirely.

71 al-Aḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 74.

72 al-Aḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 74 – 75. As has already been pointed out, the chronology of Yemeni and Egyptian memoirs is often suspect. However, al-Aḥmar claims he arrived in Ṣan‘ā’ the day before Zubayrī arrived from Cairo, which he says was Sunday, September 30.

73 This is the initial flight Ferris (Nasser’s Gamble, 50) describes of exiles, an Egyptian communication team, and Brigadier General ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Khābīr. Aḥmar’s account of the plane landing on the morning of September 30 agrees with Ferris’ narrative.

74 Obviously, the tribes and, for that matter, the intellectual and tribal elite in Yemen were not a monolithic bloc in which one individual spoke for the entire group.
supporting al-Sallāl and the revolution? Did al-Zubayrī and al-Iryānī bring him around; did he influence them? And what if any role did al-Sallāl’s low social status play in the thinking of the three men? As a non-sayyid, al-Aḥmar of course couldn’t be imām, but he was still a deeply traditional figure, and much like the sayyid class, he would not have married his daughters to someone of al-Sallāl’s standing. Unfortunately, we’ll never know with any certainty exactly what the three men said that day. Al-Aḥmar was the last of the three to die, and got the final word. His silence on their conversation, when he so often goes into such great detail on other more minor points, is striking.

The result of the meeting, however, is clear. After his discussion with al-Zubayrī and al-Iryānī, al-Aḥmar returned to talk to al-Sallāl, and from there he went straight to the radio station. Just like the night of the revolution, the radio once again played a pivotal role in communication. On the air, al-Aḥmar announced that the Ḥāshid tribal confederation supported the revolution and the republic and that it would fight to defend them. Even though he was the paramount shaykh of Ḥāshid, al-Aḥmar was taking the fairly unusual step of claiming to speak for the entire confederation, a grouping that included seven major tribes and several sub-tribes and clans. The next several years would put al-Aḥmar’s statement to the test: could a shaykh speak for his tribe and confederation? Still, despite all that, al-Aḥmar’s radio statement was a key moment of support for the Republicans. In 1948, Aḥmad had relied on the tribes to support him. In 1962, the paramount shaykh of Ḥāshid, one of Yemen’s two major confederations and a wing of the imāmate, was announcing his (and his confederation’s) support for the new republic.

Al-Aḥmar’s fight, as we saw at the end of chapter three, was personal. The Ḥamīd al-Dīn family had executed his father and brother. But the Ḥāshid confederation was Zaydī and what did it mean to be Zaydī without an imām? An answer to that question would play out over the

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75 al-Aḥmar, *Mudhakkirāt*, 75.
next several years of the civil war and, indeed, as we will see in Part III, continues to impact Yemen today. But over the course of two days in late September 1962, al-Sallāl and his fledgling republican regime gained two key backers. Nasser recognized the republic on September 29. The next day the first Egyptian plane arrived in Ṣan‘ā’ – a sign of things to come – and that same day al-Aḥmar publicly announced his and the Ḥāshid confederation’s backing of al-Sallāl. Together, Nasser and al-Aḥmar were two key pillars of support for al-Sallāl in his first week. The Republican president was secure as long as both continued to support him.

**Al-Badr’s Return**

After escaping twice in one night, first from the assassin and then from the shelling, al-Badr slipped into the narrow street outside the palace with the small handful of guards that remained loyal. At this crucial moment when the coup was still not a success – Badr was alive and no one was really in charge – the imām was strangely passive. Instead of taking action like his father might have done, al-Badr waited. He paused when he needed to move. That first night while Badr hid in the partially shelled palace, soldiers across town, near the base of Mount Nuqum, were engaged in heavy fighting. Men loyal to al-Sallāl and al-Mughnī had attempted to force their way into the armory to take control of the weapons and ammunition. But the guards who were unaware of the coup and were under standing orders to admit no one without prior permission, refused access. Al-Sallāl’s men tried to forced their way inside, sparking an hours-long gun battle that left 80 soldiers dead in the bloodiest clash of the night.

Would the result have been the same if al-Badr had been on the scene? It is impossible to know with any degree of certainty, of course. But his inaction stands in marked contrast to the decisive steps his father took in similar situations, not only in 1948 but later as well. Aḥmad

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76 Of course, his father also escaped Ta‘izz, but as we just read, thanks to the radio al-Badr didn’t have as much time to coordinate a response.
seemed to know intuitively, during the attempted coups of 1955 and 1959, that he needed to secure money and weapons. In moments of crisis, those were the twin pillars—just as much as Ḥāshid and Bakīl—on which the imāmate rested. But in al-Badr’s first test as imām he made no move to secure the treasury or the armory. He simply fled for his life. The physical presence of an imām, even a weak and new imām like al-Badr, may have made a difference. Instead al-Badr hid out with a supporter, listening to reports on Radio Ṣan‘ā’ that he had been killed and that Dār al-Bashā’ir was in ruins.⁷⁷

According to an account he gave weeks later to journalists at a press conference in the mountains of north Yemen, al-Badr claimed he was initially given refuge by a woman who recognized him in the street outside the palace.⁷⁸ Al-Badr spent most of the next day, September 27, hiding in the house. But as the radio broadcasts continued, he knew he couldn’t stay there. Al-Badr had been conditioned by his experience as well as that of his father to retreat north to the tribes in times of trouble. That evening, shortly after the sun went down, he slipped out of the house and along with a few companions made his way to a low section in the city wall. “Oh God, just get me over the wall, then I’ll be alright,” he remembered thinking weeks later.⁷⁹ Once clear of the city, al-Badr and his remaining guards set out on what would be a week’s long journey. The goal, as it always was for the Ḥāmīd al-Dīn imāms, was Ḥajjah in the north Yemeni highlands. Al-Badr couldn’t have known it at the time, but he would never set foot in Ṣan‘ā’ again.

The tribal dynamic had changed in the 14 years since his father had made a similar trip and even since he had gone north three years earlier. When al-Badr had needed help in 1959 he

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⁷⁷ Adams Schmidt, *Yemen*, 30. It is important to take Schmidt’s account with a grain of salt. Although he observed some of the events first-hand, he does not have a good grasp on Yemeni history or culture and his rendering of Arabic words is often mistaken and misleading.
reached out to his friend Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar, but both Ḥamīd and his father, Ḫusayn, were dead, executed by al-Badr’s father. Leadership of the Ḩashid confederation had passed to Ḥamīd’s younger brother, ‘Abdullāh, who was now eager to exact revenge on the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. Al-Badr’s mistakes in 1959 followed by his father’s harsh reaction had turned large portions of the Ḩashid confederation against the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. When the imām needed help, one of the wings of the imāmate – the Ḩāshid confederation – wasn’t responding. It is difficult to overstate exactly how important Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar’s support was for the Republican cause. Throughout all confusion and chaos, the young shaykh never wavered. It may be true that he was less pro-Republican than he was anti-Ḥamīd al-Dīn, but the result was the same: he backed the Republicans at the expense of the Royalists.

Of course, tribes in Yemen have never been a monolithic bloc. They make their own decisions and chart their own course based on perceived self interest. Even the tribes within Ḩāshid and Bakīl, which are more properly tribal confederations, often disagree with one another. Tribes often opposed particular imāms, and indeed inter-tribal rivalry and playing one tribe against another was a tactic various imāms used to maintain power. As we have seen, in the twentieth century the amount of control an imām in Ṣan‘ā’ was able to exert over tribes in the highlands or the desert in Ma’rib increased significantly. For decades both Yaḥyā and Aḥmad excelled at playing tribes against one another. They used weak tribes or, in some cases, tribal leaders to offset more powerful ones. The balancing was continual and ever shifting and often carried out through proxies.


81 An interesting and intriguing modern echo of this imāmic practice is former president ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Sāliḥ’s use of the *i’timād* system. *I’timād*, literally “reliance” became shorthand in late twentieth century Yemen for who was on the president’s pay roll. Who was receiving money and who was not. Like the imams, Sāliḥ used this system to
None of this was new. What was new, was that some of the tribes supported what was already being called optimistically al-thawra, the revolution. They weren’t backing a rival claimant for the throne; they were supporting an entirely new form of government. They were backing a republic. For some like ‘Abdullāh al-Āḥmar this was an easy choice. A discussion with al-Sallāl and another one with Iryānī and the young tribal shaykh announced his support for the republic over Radio Ṣan‘ā’. Others had a more a difficult time. For many, particularly tribal shaykhs north of Ṣan‘ā’, the “revolution” started as more of an anti-Ḥamīd al-Dīn movement than an anti-imāmic one. Yemen’s various opposition groups had been attempting to get rid of the family for years, and each attempt had failed. Now, at long last, one of them looked like it was about to succeed. That it was carried out by soldiers and would soon have the backing of the Egyptian military wasn’t immediately clear, and even if it had been, it isn’t certain that this would have made any difference. The Ḥamīd al-Dīn family had made so many enemies over the first half of the twentieth century that when al-Badr fled Ṣan‘ā’ the day after the coup he had fewer allies than he thought. As al-Badr moved north out of Ṣan‘ā’ he was traveling in the wake of the radio. Broadcasts from Radio Ṣan‘ā’ had already been heard by many of the tribes he met with on his journey to Ḥajjah, who were surprised to see the young imām still alive after being reported dead. In New York, Badr’s uncle, Ḥasan, heard news of the coup and the mistaken reports of his nephew’s death. Immediately he set off for Saudi Arabia and declared himself imām, becoming the first candidate to issue his da’wa from abroad.

The confusion over al-Badr’s status and Ḥasan’s claims were settled more than a month later, on November 10, when al-Badr welcomed a dozen journalists, including Kim Philby of the

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82 al-Āḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 75
Economist who was soon-to-be unmasked as a Soviet spy. Badr opened the two-hour mountain press conference by dispelling the rumors of his death. “As you can see, here I am,” he told the journalists. The imām had survived, but it was unclear how much support he enjoyed. Egypt had thousands of troops on the ground and the war for Yemen was about to begin. That war is the subject of Part II.

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83 Schmidt, Yemen, 49.
84 Schmidt, Yemen, 57.
Part II:
The Civil War
(1962 – 1970)
This chapter focuses on the war years in Yemen, spanning the period from late 1962, when Imām al-Badr reappeared, to Britain’s announcement of an imminent withdrawal from Aden in early 1966 and Nasser’s “long breath” strategy. The first section sets the stage for this chapter by dealing with the international context and mediation efforts in late 1962 and early 1963. Initially, the UN took the lead, with the express intention of bringing the war to an end. But Saudi distrust of the UN was so strong that the US eventually had to intervene with its own diplomatic mission. Although both the US and UN claimed that they were seeking an end to the war in Yemen, they were really mediating to avoid an all out war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. War inside Yemen was acceptable; a war that spilled over into Saudi Arabia was not. As we discuss below, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia were US allies and the Kennedy administration wanted to prevent open conflict between the two. More so than any other country, the US response set the tone for the international community. When the US recognized al-Sallāl’s Republican government, the UN quickly followed. For its part, Britain was so worried over a potential American response to its supplying the Royalists that it attempted to keep this secret from it allies across the Atlantic. In the end, the Kennedy administration determined that a regional version of the Cold War – with Egypt on one side and Saudi Arabia on the other – was acceptable.¹ The US would tolerate proxy wars that remained contained but not ones that spilled over international boundaries and threatened key US allies. This, of course, mirrored the broader US strategy in its struggle against the Soviet Union: avoid open conflict.

while freely engaging in proxy wars around the world. By the time Kennedy was assassinated in late 1963 the prospect of war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia had diminished to the point that Yemen never became an issue of concern for the Johnson administration.²

This chapter also examines the three factors associated with Royalist support in the north and argues that many of the tribes, if not their shaykhs, were initially Royalist by default. They didn’t know the Republic, and they didn’t trust the men in charge of its government. Ṣan‘ā’ had, in most cases, been far away and the tribes of the northern highlands were, broadly speaking, in favor of the imāmate if not necessarily the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty. Drawing on the work of Shelagh Weir, we look at the tribes in Rāziḥ, who sided with al-Badr. The second category of support from which the Royalists drew was due to Republican, and particularly Egyptian, mistakes. This took the form of violating things such as hijrah status, a protected area which had been longstanding in many places for centuries.³ There were also cases of disproportionate Egyptian responses, which tended to drive people into the arms of the Royalists. The third and final strand that this chapter examines is the financial and material support the Royalists doled out as a way of attracting fighters. This had always been a feature of the tribal politics in Yemen, with the imāms offering, or promising, some form of pecuniary benefit to the tribes in compensation for their support and loyalty. Taken together, these three strands – default support from the tribes, Egyptian overreactions, and money – were enough to give the Royalists a solid base of support during the early years of the war and prevent the Egyptians from pacifying the countryside and pushing on to Saudi Arabia.

² Of course, the Johnson administration was just ramping up US involvement in the Vietnam War, which became a primary US focus.
In the third section, we look at the reasons for Egypt’s failure in Yemen. This chapter finds three reasons that Nasser’s military bogged down in Yemen: terrain, temperament, and tribes. Egypt’s military was not prepared to fight in Yemen’s rugged terrain, which often forced the units to split into smaller and smaller groups as they chased Royalist bands. These smaller groups of Egyptian soldiers essentially took the decision-making out of the hands of Egypt’s well-trained senior officer corps and put it in the hands of junior officers, who were largely unprepared to take leadership. The terrain also neutralized Egypt’s numerical and hardware advantage. Yemen’s highlands simply didn’t give Egypt’s tanks the room to maneuver and, in the end, many of them remained in the urban areas that Egypt had controlled from the beginning.

The second factor that contributed to Egypt’s failure in Yemen was temperament, which not only includes the poor innovation/leadership skills of Nasser’s junior officers but also the over-aggressive reprisals, which we touched on above. The final factor in Egypt’s failure in Yemen was a poor understanding of Yemen’s tribal structure. There is no evidence to suggest that Nasser or his military high command ever grasped the importance of tribes to Yemen. Nasser wanted to export the Egyptian revolution to Yemen and then export it to Saudi Arabia. Yemen was supposed to be the means to an end, but for Nasser and his dream of pan-Arab socialism it became simply the end.

The final section touches on the splits between Yemeni Republicans, focusing on the resignation of al-Zubayrī and others in late 1964 and the Khamir and Ḥaraḍ conferences in 1965. This chapter argues that, as is often the case in proxy wars, outside powers are unable to effectively control the outcome. Both Nasser and King Fayṣal of Saudi Arabia proved incapable of getting the various local players to agree on either a timetable or a mechanism to end the war. It was only after Egypt withdrew and the Saudis ceased their financial support to the Royalists
that Yemenis were able to reassert local control over the war and, in time, come to a conclusion and a settlement, both of which will be dealt with more fully in chapter seven.

The International Context

On December 19, 1962, a few weeks after Muḥammad al-Badr reappeared in the mountains of northern Yemen, the US officially recognized the Yemen Arab Republic. Two days later, on December 21, the UN General Assembly voted to unseat Aḥmad Zabarah, Yemen’s royalist representative to the UN, by a vote of 74-3. The two moves – one positive and one negative – effectively came to the same conclusion: international acceptance of the coup d’état in Yemen. In the zero-sum game of international relations, both were wins for al-Sallāl and Egypt, and losses for al-Badr and the Saudis. Each was the result of months of diplomacy, discussion, and debate.

In the late fall of 1962, when the coup took place, the Middle East’s two primary powers, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, were moving in opposite directions, with the US attempting to bridge the ever-widening gap. Yemen would prove a difficult challenge, as various US allies – Saudi Arabia, the UK, and Egypt – became involved on opposing sides. The solution the US eventually hit upon, after some early attempts at diplomacy, was to discourage any overt and active conflict between its various allies while turning a blind eye to their support of proxies in the field. This approach allowed the US to maintain the status quo with the powers that mattered in the region – Egypt and Saudi Arabia – while paying almost no price for the continued war in Yemen. In political terms, Yemen didn’t matter to the US on its own terms. It didn’t matter in the Cold War and it didn’t matter for the region, unless the conflict was allowed to expand

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4 Saudi Arabia and Jordan were the only two Arab countries to vote against unseating the Royalist representative in favor of a Republican one. See, for instance, “U.N. Votes to Unseat Yemen Royalist,” U.P.I, December 22, 1962.
5 I mean “positive and negative” in the philosophical sense of a positive endorsement of the new regime by the US and a renunciation of the old regime by the UN.
beyond Yemen’s borders. As long as all parties understood this, the US was willing to acquiesce to support of proxies in Yemen that, in all likelihood, extended the length of the war.

At the beginning of the conflict, Egypt was treading a careful line, attempting to maintain cordial relationships with both the US and the Soviet Union. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, would soon find itself making common cause with the UK, which was also opposed to Nasser’s expansionist tendencies. The Kennedy administration initially took a cautious approach, trying to appease both of its nominal allies in the Middle East. Then, as now, US policy toward Yemen was seen through a regional prism. As Jesse Ferris points out in his study of Nasser’s foreign policy, Egypt was “the focal point of Kennedy’s Middle East policy.” At the heart of US-Egyptian relations was the “Food for Peace” deal of 1954 that supplied Egypt with wheat and other basic foodstuffs. On September 26, 1962, when the coup in Yemen took place, the US was in the midst of re-evaluating and renegotiating the Food for Peace deal. As we have already seen, Egypt put troops in Yemen within two days of the coup. But that decision and the implicit threat to Saudi Arabia, another ally, did little to dissuade the US from coming to new terms with Egypt on the Food for Peace deal. On October 8, 1962, less than two weeks after the coup, the US signed a three-year extension to the Food for Peace deal. The idea, as Ferris and others suggest, was that the economic aid would give the US leverage over Nasser. But if that indeed

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9 Daniel Varisco reports being in al-Ahjur in 1978 and hearing imported white flour referred to as *al-Kanadi*, which he initially took to be a reference to Canada. It turned out that the wheat was still called after the US President Kennedy, which had made its ways to Yemen.
was the calculation, it was a mistaken analysis of Nasser’s mindset.\textsuperscript{11} The deal was signed, and with that card off the table Nasser continued to do what he was going to do anyway. As we will see in Part III when we look at the Ḥūthīs and alleged Iranian influence, leverage can be an elusive thing in international relations. Almost immediately after signing the deal, Nasser threatened Saudi Arabia militarily. In early November 1962, less than a month after the food for peace deal was signed, Egyptian jets bombed targets inside Saudi Arabia. That week changed the calculations for the Kennedy administration. Yemen and the fall of the imāmate, which many in Washington viewed as a reactionary regime, was one thing, but the stability and territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia was something else. The US had a defense pact with the kingdom and an agreement with Egypt. And yet by late 1962, the two pillars of its Middle East policy were nearing outright war with one another.\textsuperscript{12} The anticipated leverage never materialized; Nasser had his deal and the US had one less card with which to bargain.

Seen in this light, the US was always going to recognize the republican regime as Yemen’s legitimate government. The US thought little of al-Badr, and many in the Kennedy administration viewed the royalist collapse as all but inevitable. Still, the US was fully aware of its Saudi ally’s view and cognizant of the possibility of a broader war or even, in the worst-case scenario, the collapse of the Saudi royal family. As Ferris perceptively notes: “By manufacturing a potent menace to US interests, Nasser skillfully transformed a bilateral dialogue over US recognition, in which the Americans held the only card, into a tri-lateral negotiation.”\textsuperscript{13} Everything had become intertwined. No longer was this simply about US recognition of a new regime, although, as the UN vote illustrates, US recognition was important internationally. Now,

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\textsuperscript{11} For an example of the difficulties the US had analyzing what Nasser was thinking during this period see Miles Copeland, \textit{The Game of Nations: The Amorality of Power Politics}, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London: 1969.
\textsuperscript{12} In the aftermath of the Egyptian attacks, Saudi Arabia cut off diplomatic relations with Egypt.
\textsuperscript{13} Ferris, \textit{Nasser’s Gamble}, 109.
it was also about avoiding open war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia; a proxy war was deemed less disruptive and therefore acceptable. When the US finally did give recognition to al-Sallāl’s government in December 1962, it did so while simultaneously arranging to deploy a US Air Force squadron to Saudi Arabia as a deterrent against future attacks.\(^{14}\) Initially, at least, the US pledge did little, as Nasser struck inside Saudi Arabia again on December 30, 1962 – 11 days after the US recognized al-Sallāl’s government.\(^ {15}\) On the ground, however, things looked slightly different. Egyptian troops were still pouring into the country, but Egypt was also sustaining heavy losses. In the north, where al-Badr announced his triumphal return, the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes started to regroup. Those who had been abroad started trickling back into the country through Saudi Arabia. In December 1962, Muḥammad bin Ḥusayn, one of al-Badr’s cousins, returned to Yemen to take control of the Royalist forces in Ṣa‘dah and al-Jawf.\(^ {16}\)

In late February 1963, as we will explore in depth below, Egypt launched a “Ramadan Offensive,” (ḥuǧūm ramadān) pushing out of Ṣan‘ā’ in a trio of “armored thrusts.”\(^ {17}\) One of these thrusts moved north out of Ṣan‘ā’ towards Ṣa‘dah and the border with Saudi Arabia. For several days in early 1963, it appeared that Egypt and Saudi Arabia were on the brink of active and direct war. In an effort to forestall this both the US and the UN launched successive rounds of shuttle diplomacy. The UN effort was headed by Ralph Bunche, an American academic and diplomat who won the 1950 Nobel Peace prize for his mediation efforts in Israel in 1948; the US side, which ultimately proved more successful, was headed by Ellsworth Bunker and John Badeau, the US ambassador to Egypt. Bunche started his mission first, but when he shunned

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\(^ {17}\) The insightful map in Ferris, 180, illustrates what Egypt was trying to do with these thrusts.
Royalist commanders the Saudis refused to meet with him.\textsuperscript{18} The Saudis “understood that the guarantees they wanted could only come from the Americans.”\textsuperscript{19} At this point, Kennedy got directly involved, dispatching Bunker to the region. Over the course of several weeks, shuttling back-and-forth between Cairo and Saudi Arabia, Bunker got both Nasser and Faysal to agree to a seven-point plan on April 9, 1963. The agreement called for, among other things, a cessation of Saudi support for the Royalists and a withdrawal of Egyptian forces from Yemen.\textsuperscript{20} What it didn’t do, however, was set a timetable for either. As such, the plan was never implemented, but it did succeed in its larger, if unstated, goal of preventing direct war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, some observers have questioned whether the Bunker agreement was ever intended to “find a final solution to the Yemen problem.”\textsuperscript{21} What the Bunker agreement did, however, was to forestall direct war between two US allies, initiate a dialogue between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and establish a framework that, years later in 1967, would form the basis of a lasting settlement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. That deal, of course, as we will explore in chapter six, came on the heels of Egypt’s shocking defeat in the Six Day war in June 1967. With the potential of an Egyptian-Saudi war fading, US interest in the Yemen problem withered as well. There was little follow-up to Bunker’s efforts, and when both Egypt and Saudi Arabia failed to abide by the terms of the deal there was little outcry. Neither country, however, would again come as close to open war as they had in late 1962 and 1963. The Yemeni civil war would not spread. Instead of a regional war, sucking in more countries, it became, at least at one level, a proxy war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. That parallel war of regional and international

\textsuperscript{18} This is an interesting precursor to the 1967 diplomatic efforts, when Arab league representatives – at the behest of Nasser – refused to meet with “third way” Republicans. See, for instance, Abū Lahūm, \textit{al-yaman} vol. 2, 245 – 251. 
\textsuperscript{19} Ferris, \textit{Nasser’s Gamble}, 117. 
\textsuperscript{20} These seven points are listed in several places, including Ferris, \textit{Nasser’s Gamble}, 120. 
actors will be explored more below and in chapter six, but now we turn our attention to the war on the ground in Yemen. It was a war that would last nearly eight years and claim roughly 200,000 lives, the vast majority of whom were Yemenis.22

**Factors of Royalist Support**

Under Imām Yaḥyā and Aḥmad, Yemen had a loose standing army split between two unequal parts. The coup, as we have already seen, came from within the regular military and many of these troops, some of whom had spent time in Egypt and Iraq, largely sided with the republican forces and then almost immediately “ceased to exist.”23 The Royalists, by contrast, drew upon an irregular militia that was largely derived from the tribes, particularly those in the highlands north of Ṣan‘ā’. This is one of the reasons al-Badr retreated to Ṣa‘dah, and why the region would prove so difficult to pacify both during the war and much later during the Ḥūthī conflict. The beginning of the fighting and al-Badr’s retreat north also reversed a recent trend that had crept into the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty. Despite the Zaydī-Hadawī injunction that an imām must be a man of “the pen and the sword,” by the final decades of Yaḥyā’s rule the imām was rarely taking the field to fight with his men. Aḥmad, of course, led his father’s army in the late 1920s as well as in the 1934 war with Saudi Arabia, but by the time he became an imām his soldiering days were well in the past. Al-Badr’s short rule continued that trend. Tribesmen were not used to mixing and mingling with the imāms or Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes, particularly as part of a military engagement.24 The distant relationship between the masses and the office of the imām that the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty had built up over more than half a century would ultimately

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23 Dresch, *Modern Yemen*, 90. Many of these republican troops were later reorganized and restructured into a military built along the Egyptian lines.
24 Author’s interview with Abdullah Hamidaddin in New York, July 2012. For a similar point see, Dresch, *Modern Yemen*, 92: “It was the soldiers people feared,” says a witness. “They didn’t mind the imām so much. What did they know about him?”
fragment and then collapse altogether. But at least in the early years of the war it held. The Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes, like their Republican counterparts, worked through the shaykhs, easing the transactions with gold and guns. In fact, as we’ll soon see, one of the key changes to emerge out of the war was the way shaykhs functioned and the increased power they accrued.

When the coup was announced over the radio in Ṣan‘ā’, declaring that the imām was dead and a Republic was established, very few in the northern highlands knew exactly what this meant. With the exception of intellectuals and scholars like al-Zubayrī and Nu‘mān, large shaykly families like the al-Aḥmars, and soldiers like al-Sallāl, almost none of the tribes had a frame of reference for what the Republic would be. They had only known the imāms. Several tribal figures who had suffered under Aḥmad quickly joined with the Republicans. This group included figures like ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar, Mujāhid Abū Shawārib, both of Ḥāshid, and Sinān Abū Laḥūm of Bakīl. But others, including men who had either suffered or opposed Imām Aḥmad, were reluctant to join the revolution so quickly. Sometimes, such as in the case of Aḥmad al-Sayāghī who had fled Aḥmad’s rule, this was a case of choosing between two unattractive options. Although al-Sayāghī opposed Aḥmad and the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty, Republicans had shot and killed his brother in the early days of the revolution. He became a Royalist.25 Other times the choice of Republican or Royalist was a matter of preference and, increasingly as the war dragged on, money. As Dresch writes, in the early years “one’s impression is less of a Royalist ideal than of widespread distrust of the Republic’s government.”26 Interestingly, this distrust of the Republican government was mirrored, as we will see, by many leading Republicans’ distrust of the Egyptians. Many of the tribes in the north, however, found themselves in the position of the unaffiliated Rāziḥ tribe of whom Shelagh Weir

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25 Dresch, Modern Yemen, 94.
26 Dresch, Modern Yemen, 94.
writes that they were Royalist “by default as well as by conviction and contractual allegiance.”\textsuperscript{27} Ṣawt al-‘Arab, particularly under ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Bayḍānī, an Egyptian-born Yemeni whom we shall meet shortly, had become not only anti-imām and anti-Ḥamīd al-Dīn, but also anti-sayyid, which frightened Yemen’s religious elite by casting its net wider than was needed.

“These upheavals,” as Weir notes, “led to a flurry of pact-making which took place between the tribes and ‘their’ sayyids.”\textsuperscript{28} These were the alliances, as we will see below, that the Egyptians were never quite able to crack. They couldn’t separate the tribes from their sayyids. Toward the end of the war the sayyids stopped being thought of as “ours” or “theirs” in relation to each tribe but became a separate class.\textsuperscript{29} But that was at the end of the war, and only obvious in retrospect. During the fighting the sayyids still had a powerful role to play. Attacks on the various hijrahās, protected religious enclaves, also became a stream of support for the Royalists, driving fighters into their ranks.\textsuperscript{30}

On the military side, the Royalists were divided by region, as communication and travel between districts was still difficult. Vehicles were still not widespread, and as late as 1963 most men who attended the ‘Amrān conference, which we will touch on below, had to walk for days as vehicles were still nearly “a monopoly of the army.”\textsuperscript{31} Given these communication and logistical difficulties many of al-Badr’s uncles and cousins took command-and-control responsibilities over particular regions. The late Yemeni military historian, Sultān Nājī, lists four major regions in the Royalist resistance: Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl, Arḥab, al-Jawf, and Ḥajūr al-Shām.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{28} Weir, \textit{A Tribal Order}, 281.
\textsuperscript{29} Dresch, \textit{Tribes and Government}, 248
\textsuperscript{31} Dresch, \textit{Modern Yemen}, 93.
\textsuperscript{32} Nājī, \textit{al-tārikh}, 258 – 259.
Each of these regions was further sub-divided into smaller districts under the command of Royalist princes or, in the case of al-Jawf, other sayyid allies.\footnote{Nājī, \textit{al-tārikh}, 259, lists Ḥasan al-Shāmī, Ḥamd al-Kibṣī, and ‘Aḥd al-Malik al-Mahābīshī as fellow commanders alongside Yahyā Ḥusayn in al-Jawf.} As we saw in Part I, one of the most competent military commanders in the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family was Ḥasan bin Yaḥyā, al-Badr’s uncle who had overseen the sack of Ṣan‘ā’ in 1948 and then, when al-Badr was believed dead, issued his own \textit{da’wa} in 1962 only to retract it later. Initially, Ḥasan was seen as the Royalists’ best commander, but as the war progressed that view changed. By the end of the war and the Siege of Ṣan‘ā’, as we will see in chapter seven, it would be the then 30-year-old Muḥammad Ḥusayn who became the Royalists’ best and most determined commander. This pattern of Ḥamīd al-Dīn control, which had started under Yaḥyā in the 1920s, created a serious problem for the Royalists. By limiting the leadership pool only to the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family and a few allied sayyids, the Royalists deprived themselves of other potential leaders, who may have outperformed the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes and rolled back the Republicans. In the early years of the war, according to Nājī, the Royalists had roughly 11,000 men.\footnote{Nājī, \textit{al-tārikh}, 258.} This number is misleading, however, as with the exception of foreign contractors and mercenaries, the Royalists didn’t have a standing army. Instead they had something more resembling the \textit{al-jaysh al-barrānī}, the tribal militia of the imāmīc days.\footnote{Nājī, \textit{al-tārikh}, 113-115.} These were men who mustered for particular campaigns under their own shaykhs and then disbanded.\footnote{Dresch, \textit{Tribes and Government}, 245 – 248.} This fluidity and flexibility, as we will see below, is one of the reasons that Egypt’s Ramadan Offensive was a tactical success but a strategic failure. The tribal fighters dissipated in the face of the assault and then regrouped later for a counteroffensive.

In addition to the “default” support that the Royalists had from many tribes they also “bought” other tribes over to their side. What by the end of the war would become essentially a
rent-a-tribe phenomenon didn’t start that way. In the early days of the war, the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family was simply re-supplying and arming its supporters, but as the war dragged on and Saudi funding to stop Nasser in Yemen increased, these funds were being distributed more generously and even used as a means of attracting more fighters instead of simply rewarding existing ones. Republican mistakes also drove men into the Royalist ranks. One category of mistakes, as we will examine more in-depth below, was the heavy-handed response of the Egyptian military, which often failed to distinguish friend from foe on a battlefield in which neither Yemeni side wore uniforms. The Egyptians responded to attacks “as foreign occupiers have always done: with indiscriminate punitive raids, in which the innocent and the sympathetic were inevitably mixed up with the perpetrators and their supporters.”37 In Sanḥān and Hamdān, tribal areas just outside of Ṣanʿā’, many of the men became “largely anti-Republican, if not actually Royalist, because of the heavy-handed Egyptian action against them.”38 This sort of thing was common and became even more so as the war progressed and, along with the default support and financial backing, helped to prolong the war by maintaining a pool of fighting men for the Royalists. It is important at this point to mention a fourth factor that aided in attracting armed support for the Royalists. Unlike the previous three – default allegiance, financial enticement and response to punitive Egyptian reprisals – this one is distinctly Yemeni. We have already touched upon the changing nature of the tribes’ relationship to the sayyids, as they moved from “ours” and “theirs” to a distinct class of people. But as quickly as this transition took place during the war years it still took time. Indeed there are numerous examples of Royalist sayyids taking refuge in a hijrah, only to find that hijrah under attack by Republican, often Egyptian, forces.39 Such attacks violated traditional Yemeni norms, which viewed the hijrah as sacrosanct enclaves that

37 Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 184.
38 Dresch, Tribes and Government, 246.
39 Dresch, Tribes and Government, 248.
were off limits to warfare, and also helped drive tribes toward the Royalist side. One sees here, as in many wars, alliances developing as a response to personal slights and local losses. This, as does the case of al-ʾAḥmar joining the Republicans, illustrates what was true on both sides.

The ‘Amrān Conference

Still, the battle lines were often fuzzy and the distinction between Republican and Royalist was frequently less clear than was assumed from the outside. In September 1963, nearly a year after the war began, members of both the Yemeni Republican side and the Yemeni Royalist side sat down in ‘Amrān for an early attempt at mediation. The Republican camp consisted of the usual leaders: al-Zubayrī, al-Iryānī, Nu’mān, al-ʾAḥmar, as well as Amīn Abū Raʾs.40 No Egyptians or Ḥāmīd al-Dīn princes attended, but several Royalist shaykhs did – ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ṭayyib lists shaykhs from Nihm, Arḥab, and ‘Īyāl Yazīd41 – and the parties agreed to a list of demands.42 This agreement was one of the early signs of a fracture within Republican ranks, as already key figures like the Republicans mentioned above were losing patience with Egypt’s actions in Yemen.43 In the end, the participants produced 28 resolutions, including a call for the end of foreign intervention with the intent of presenting these to al-Sallāl and Nasser.44 A delegation was sent to Cairo, but little happened, and the attempt “disappeared into plot and counterplot.”45

The Al-Jawf Conference

40 al-ʾAḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 95. As always in Yemen, negotiation was as big a part of the war as fighting.
42 al-Ṭayyib, Naksat, 216. Al-Ṭayyib does mention that the local Egyptian commander, Sayyid Ṣabrī, was in ‘Amrān at the time but he does not appear to have attended the conference.
43 A key demand by the Republican side was the return of Ḥāmmūd al-Jāʾīfī from Cairo where he had been detained by Nasser. This would become a recurring theme for Republicans who went to Cairo to meet with Nasser and his generals.
44 For a full discussion of the 28 resolutions see al-Ṭayyib, Naksat, 218-221.
45 Dresch, Tribes and Government, 93.
Another conference held a few months later in al-Jawf had a similar mix of Royalists and Republicans. Although this time the conference was headed by Prince Muḥammad Ḥusayn and was missing Republican stalwarts like al-Aḥmar, al-Zubayrī, Nuʿmān, al-Ḥiyānī and others.\footnote{Adams Schmidt, \textit{Yemen}, 176-177.} What is notable about the al-Jawf conference, which is now largely ignored in Republican memoirs, is that even at this late date, two years after the revolution, there was still talk of reforming the imāmate and creating, like in 1948, a constitutional imāmate. Once again, resolutions were drawn up – an elected imām, a cabinet, independent judiciary, and an elected assembly – only to go nowhere.\footnote{Adams Schmidt, \textit{Yemen}, 177.} With a few exceptions, the Royalists and Republicans were willing to meet and talk and, on some things, even agree. But neither Nasser nor the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family was willing to relinquish Yemen to their supporters on the ground. The war would go on. It is now time to turn our attention to Egypt and its attempts to achieve victory militarily and why those attempts were bound to fail.

**Reasons for Egypt’s Failure**

Almost immediately after the announcement of the coup there were issues and concerns with what Egypt’s role should be in the Yemeni revolution.\footnote{Ṣādiq Nāshr, \textit{Yaḥyā al-Mutawakkil, Ṣan‘ā’}, Markaz al-ʿUbādī: 2003, 64.} In time, local Yemenis would come to feel as though Egypt controlled Ṣan‘ā’ and the levers of government power. One man, Muḥammad al-Murayt, who worked in the Ministry of Oil, explained: “The Egyptians controlled everything. In the beginning they were very sincere and loyal, but over time they began to take money, weapons, gold and jambiyas and send them to Egypt.”\footnote{Dresch, \textit{Modern History}, 91; also author’s interview with Muḥammad Isma’il al-Murayt, March 4 and April 21, 2004 in Ṣan‘ā’}. In much the same way that the ‘Amrān conference sent a delegation to Cairo to inform Nasser of what was happening on the ground, most Yemenis continued to believe that the Egyptian president would change course if
only he knew what was actually happening. “I am sure Nasser did not know what his soldiers were doing, but they still did it,” al-Murayt said years later.⁵⁰ “Ḩudaydah became like Dubai today. All of the Egyptian officers who served in Yemen are now very rich. The Egyptians who worked at the Ministry of Oil would sell oil on the black market and keep the money they made.”⁵¹ There is likely a bit of hyperbole and conflation of contemporary Yemeni politics (oil and diesel smuggling under Ṣāliḥ) with the Egyptian period, but what amounted to an Egyptian occupation of Yemen still rubbed many would-be Republicans the wrong way. Nasser attempted to direct and channel the Yemeni revolution through ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Bayḍānī, an Egyptian of Yemeni descent. He arrived in Yemen from Cairo four days after the coup, and was quickly named Minister of Economics before later becoming vice president, deputy commander, foreign minister and prime minister.⁵² It was “clear that Egyptian aid depended on his wishes being followed.”⁵³ Like al-Zubayrī, al-Bayḍānī was a veteran of Nasser’s Ṣawt al-‘Arab often giving vitriolic anti-sayyid messages in the months before the coup. However, unlike al-Zubayrī, al-Bayḍānī did not understand Yemen. A Shafi‘ī of Yemeni heritage, he had been born in Cairo, and like many expatriates and reformers he had been attracted to al-Badr when the latter was crown prince. At one point, in 1955, al-Badr even convinced Imām Aḥmad to send al-Bayḍānī to Germany as a Yemeni diplomat, a posting that al-Bayḍānī used to secure his doctorate in political economy.⁵⁴ When al-Badr was in charge of the country in 1959, al-Bayḍānī visited Yemen, but he fled back to Egypt as soon as Imām Aḥmad returned from Rome.⁵⁵ As Dana

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⁵⁰ Author interview with al-Murayt, Ṣan‘ā‘.
⁵¹ Author interview with al-Murayt, Ṣan‘ā‘.
⁵² Dresch, Tribes and Government, 243 – 244. Dresch lists only vice president, foreign minister and deputy commander of the armed forces, while Yahyā al-Mutawakkil lists al-Bayḍānī as vice president, prime minister and foreign minister. See Nāshr, Yahyā al-Mutawakkil, 64.
⁵³ Dresch, Tribes and Government, 244.
⁵⁴ O’Ballance, The War in Yemen, 74.
⁵⁵ O’Ballance, The War in Yemen, 74; Adams Schmidt, Yemen, 71, suggests that al-Baḍānī may have in fact embezzled funds in Germany, which would explain his hasty departure upon Aḥmad’s return in 1959.
Adams Schmidt, the *New York Times* correspondent, later wrote, al-Bayḍānī “looked, acted, and talked like a smart young Egyptian university teacher. Few Yemenis understood him.”

But for all that he was Nasser’s man in Ṣan‘ā’. 

Al-Bayḍānī arrived in Ṣan‘ā’ just days after the revolution. Almost immediately his presence, and particularly his accumulation of titles, bothered Yemeni Republicans. Some have speculated that this may have been due to al-Bayḍānī’s Shafi’ī background, but Aḥmad Nu‘mān was also a Shafi’ī, the only other one in government, and he also opposed al-Bayḍānī being foisted upon the new government. Figures such as al-Mutawakkil, al-Zubayrī, Nu‘mān, and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Iryānī were all united in their opposition to al-Bayḍānī’s arriving in Ṣan‘ā’ and yet Nasser sent him anyways, which illustrates, at least in the early days, who was calling the shots in Ṣan‘ā’. The first Egyptian soldiers arrived on September 28, and within a week there were 3,000 in Yemen, primarily in Ṣan‘ā’ and Ta‘izz. A few weeks later in mid-November that number would be more than 8,000. By way of comparison, the Yemeni army at that time numbered roughly 7,000, which meant that less than two months after the coup the Egyptian soldiers outnumbered the Yemeni soldiers they were there to support. One case study of Egypt’s involvement in the Yemeni civil war divides the military intervention into three phases:

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57 al-Bayḍānī was also close to the Egyptian vice president Anwar al-Sadat, who was supposed to be spearheading much of Egypt’s Yemen policy at the time.
58 Most sources, such as O’Ballance and Adams Schmidt and many others have September 30, while Ferris has al-Bayḍānī leaving Cairo on September 28, see Ferris, *Nasser’s Gamble*, 78.
59 Nāshr, *Yahyā al-Mutawakkil*, 64.
60 Nāshr, *Yahyā al-Mutawakkil*, 64 – 65. Although al-Mutawakkil only mentions these three by name the impression he gives is that the opposition to al-Bayḍānī was much more widespread.
63 Of course, many of the Republic’s tribal fighters, including al-Aḥmar’s men, were not counted in this total.
October 1962 – May 1963, June 1963 – February 1966, and March 1967 – December 1967.\textsuperscript{64} As we will see, the first two phases were marked by major offensives, both of which failed, and the third by withdrawal. Egypt also shipped in armored cars and tanks, which would prove largely useless outside of Yemen’s few urban areas. Yahyā al-Mutawakkil speaks for many early Republicans when he says in his memoir that Nasser’s decision to intervene and send troops to Yemen is one of the reasons the war went on as long as it did.\textsuperscript{65}

But once Nasser had made the series of decisions that led to intervention, he couldn’t stop, and the Egyptian troops kept coming. By the beginning of 1963 there were at least 15,000 Egyptian soldiers in Yemen.\textsuperscript{66} At the same time Egypt was also conducting air raids against “Royalist” targets. It is unclear exactly what intelligence the Egyptians were using to support these raids, but many cities – such as Ma’rib – were largely deserted as Egyptian pilots made little distinction between combatants and civilians. Indeed, although Egypt denied it at the time, most outside observers now agree that Egypt also used chemical weapons against Yemeni targets. This view is supported by testimony on the ground. In Khawlān, not far outside Ṣan‘ā’, tribal elders who lived through the war remembered seeing white plumes in the sky following Egyptian air raids and witnessing illness in villagers after the strikes.\textsuperscript{67} The villagers, who claimed not to support the imam, abandoned their small villages to take refuge in the mountains, and as we touched on above, these heavy-handed reprisals helped channel men to the Royalist cause.\textsuperscript{68} These chemical weapons attacks started in 1963 and would continue until the Egyptian withdrawal in 1967. The use of chemical weapons is perhaps the most egregious outcome of

\textsuperscript{65} Nāshr, \textit{Yahyā al-Mutawakkil}, 69.
\textsuperscript{66} Nājjī, \textit{al-Tārikh}, 223; Dana Adams Schmidt, \textit{Yemen}, 164: puts the total number of Egyptian troops in early 1963 at 20,000.
\textsuperscript{67} Author interview with a tribal elder in Khawlān, who requested anonymity, in July 2004, Khawlān.
\textsuperscript{68} Author interview with a tribal elder in Khawlān, who requested anonymity, in July 2004, Khawlān.
Egypt’s co-opting and controlling of Yemen’s revolution. It is unlikely that al-Iryānī, al-Zubayrī, Nu‘mān, or even al-Sallāl on his own would have sanctioned the use of chemical weapons against fellow Yemenis, whether they were Royalist or not. This was an Egyptian tactic in Yemen and, like Nasser’s sending of al-Baydānī, starkly illustrates who was in charge. As al-Mutawakkil says above, this is one of the reasons that the war lasted so long: Egypt had a different goal than its Republican allies on the ground. The Yemeni Republicans wanted to overthrow the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty, the Egyptians wanted to threaten Saudi Arabia and spread Nasser’s revolution throughout Arabia. In time, as we will see in this chapter’s final section, these differences would lead to a series of splits in the Republican ranks.

Initially, Egypt and Nasser believed that Yemen would be an easy first step on their way toward Saudi Arabia. The revolution had already taken place, and all Egyptian forces needed to do was consolidate control over Ṣanʿā’ and a few other population centers such as Ḥudaydah and Ta‘izz and they would be ready to move on to Saudi Arabia. Indeed, much of Egypt’s early military maneuvers bear out this understanding of Egyptian motives. Egyptian troops landed in Ṣanʿā’ and Ta‘izz, while ships docked in Ḥudaydah. But other than that, Egypt did very little in late 1962. As Kenneth Pollack, a military historian notes, “it is unclear what the Egyptians were trying to do in the beginning.” But by early 1963 it was obvious that Egypt would need a counterinsurgency campaign in order to pacify the countryside and defeat the Royalists on their way to Saudi Arabia. Not coincidentally, this is also where Nasser’s strategy in Yemen started to fall apart. At the request of Field Marshall ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm ʿĀmir, who was overseeing Egyptian combat operations, Nasser doubled the number of Egyptian troops in Yemen to nearly 30,000 troops.

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and added 200 combat aircraft. The plan, such as it was, appeared to be based on the assumption that an influx of troops and airpower would allow Egypt to root out Royalist resistance and put a decisive end to the war. In February and March of 1963, ‘Āmir launched what would come to be called the “Ramadan Offensive.” The idea was essentially to create a pincer movement: one group of Egyptian forces with Yemeni allies would move east out of Ṣan‘ā’, traveling just south of the city of Ma’rib and then north into al-Jawf, where the Royalists were most active. The second arm of the pincer moved north out of Ṣan‘ā’ into the highlands near the Saudi border before turning south into al-Jawf. This would allow the Egyptians to do two things at once. First, they took the city of Ma’rib, which was a major Royalist supply center, and second they dispersed the Royalists in al-Jawf, where they had been most active. A third armored thrust moved north towards Ṣa‘dah. On the surface, as Ferris and others note, this looked like an incredible Egyptian victory, as Nasser’s troops pushed along major roads and seized key cities. But for all its tactical brilliance, the offensive was a strategic flop.

By the end of the month ‘Āmir, the supreme commander of Egypt’s military, was in Ṣa‘dah. “The flag of the revolution and the republic,” one commentator noted, “now waved over every corner of the republic.” The Egyptians, however, were fighting a conventional war against an unconventional opponent. It is a military truism that armies are built to fight a mirror image of themselves. The Egyptian military was fighting the Royalists as if they were configured like the Egyptian army. But this wasn’t the case. The Royalists weren’t even, properly speaking, an army. They were tribesmen and guerillas, men “who were rallied for each

70 Pollack, Arabs at War, 49.
71 The military component of the Ramadan Offensive is perhaps best understood through maps such as in Pollack, Arabs at War, 50 and Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 180. The two maps are slightly different, with Ferris’ providing more detail, but both give a sense of the Egyptian objectives.
72 Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 181.
73 al-Farah, Sīrah, 73.
The Egyptians, in other words, could take territory but they could never hold it. The Royalists simply faded away. The Egyptians scattered them but didn’t kill them. “As these spearheads moved on,” Dresch notes, “there closed up behind them an indigenous world of alliance, dispute and shifting truces.” This is what the Egyptians never quite understood. Nasser and his high command grasped little about the internal dynamics in play within Yemen. One map produced by Egyptian intelligence during the war illustrates this lack of knowledge. The map, which purports to be a tribal map of northern Yemen, is largely blank in the areas directly north of Ṣanʿā’ save for a pair of words: Ḥāshid and Bakīl. The few individual tribes that are located on the map are misplaced, while the majority are simply missed or ignored. The Egyptian high command considered Yemen a primitive, backward country, almost unworthy of their attention or study, at least initially. Similar views are also apparent in popular Egyptian literature set in the 1960s such as the work of Bahāʾ Ṭāhir. Indeed, even the Ottomans during the late nineteenth century and the CIA after 9/11 had similarly poor maps of Yemen’s tribal geography. It was a hubris that would prove costly. Towns were one thing, but these were relatively rare in Yemen, and the rural countryside proved much more difficult. Unfortunately for the Egyptians, this is where the bulk of the population lived. The Egyptians could control the towns through garrisons of soldiers stationed there and by Egyptian officials imposed on the population, but they failed to accomplish something similar in the rural regions, which was most

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74 Dresch, Tribes and Government, 247.
75 Pollack, Arabs at War, 51.
76 Dresch, Modern History, 93.
77 This map, a copy of which I acquired in Ṣanʿā’ in 2009, is still in my possession.
78 During a Fulbright-Hays year in Cairo (2010-11) I experienced something similar when I brought up Yemen to Egyptian colleagues and researchers, who seemed to still view the country as wild and untamed. “Don’t go there,” one told me, “you’ll never come back alive.” Egyptian literature broadly mirrors this view.
79 See, for instance, the descriptions of Yemen in Bahāʾ Ṭāhir, Qālat duḥā, Cairo: Dār al-Ādāb, 1999.
80 On the Ottomans see Thomas Kuehn, Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference: Ottoman Rule in Yemen, Boston: Brill, 2011. On the CIA, the author has had personal discussions with agency personnel involved in a “tribal mapping” project in Yemen.
of Yemen, because they didn’t understand either the tribes or the tribal structure and custom. In this way they were like the Ottomans, and like the Ottomans they, too, would fail to pacify Yemen. In many ways the Ramadan Offensive, carried out when Egypt had roughly 15,000 troops in the country, was Egypt’s high water mark. That was the point, as one Egyptian commander would later say, at which they should have simply withdrawn and declared victory. As the offensive was drawing to a close, the US and UN as we saw above, launched a two-track effort to ensure that the war remained contained in Yemen.

Egypt’s ultimate failure in Yemen can be broken down into three broad categories: terrain, temperament, and tribes. We have already touched on the first issue of terrain in chapter four, where we discussed Egypt’s strategy of controlling the capital, a central hub, which would bring the rest of the country along with it. Such a strategy works against a conventional opponent in a country like Egypt, where Cairo is the undisputed center around which everything else revolves. But Yemen had neither a conventional military foe nor a single center. Unlike the hub-and-spoke geographical model of Egypt, Yemen was more accurately understood as a series of constellations, each of which had its own center. Yemen’s terrain presented two distinct challenges for the Egyptian military that it was never able to overcome. Cairo’s advantage in both men and matériel disappeared in Yemen’s mountains. The highlands neutralized Egypt’s numerical advantage by forcing military units to split into smaller and smaller groups all of which had to make decisions independently while operating as part of a larger whole. The terrain, particularly outside of the few main roads, simply didn’t allow for large-scale troop

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81 Kuehn, Empire, Islam, and Politics of Difference; on the Ottoman failure. For the Egyptian failure see Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble. Ferris is more explicit than most in pointing out how the Egyptians failed to grasp Yemen’s tribal structure but this critique is also implicit in the memoirs of Yemenis such as Yahyā al-Mutawakkil and others. See, for instance, Nāshr, Yahyā al-Mutawakkil, 69 where he discusses Nasser’s decision to send troops as being one of the reasons that the war lasted so long.

82 Quoted in Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 122.
movements. In addition to eliminating Egypt’s numerical advantage, Yemen’s terrain also took away its advantage in military hardware, particularly tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs). Just like with troop movements, the rugged terrain wouldn’t permit Egypt’s tanks and APCs the room they needed to operate. Instead of moving into the rural regions, where Egypt needed them most, the tanks and APCs remained in urban centers that Egypt already controlled. Even Egypt’s Air Force was of limited strategic use. It could bomb targets, but like the indiscriminate shelling from the ground, this often caused more problems than it solved. Additionally, Yemen’s terrain of mountains and caves provided significant shelter for Royalists fighters, and leveled the playing field and allowed the Royalists to recover from operations like the 1963 Ramadan Offensive.

In addition to neutralizing two of what many considered to be Egyptian advantages in the fight – men and matériel – the terrain in Yemen also helped exacerbate an Egyptian weakness of temperament as well as its weakness in military command structures and the lack of autonomy of decision-making at the platoon level. By forcing the Egyptian army into smaller and smaller units in order to pursue Royalist bands and attempt to pacify the countryside, the terrain compelled Egypt’s best and most highly-trained commanders to delegate leadership responsibilities to junior officers. These officers, in the words of Kenneth Pollack, “rarely demonstrated the independent judgment and aggressiveness necessary for success in these circumstances.” It would take Egypt years of war and failure to realize that these junior officers weren’t capable of the sort of innovative decision-making that Yemen required. Eventually, Egypt started funneling college graduates into the army in the hopes of offsetting this

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83 Yemen’s two main road: Ḥudaydah - Ṣan‘ā’ and Ta‘izz - Ṣan‘ā’ were both relatively recent, dating only to the 1950s.
84 Pollack, Arabs at War, 54.
challenge and strengthening its junior officer corps. But by then it was too late. The second problem of temperament that plagued the Egyptians in Yemen was a simple case of hubris and arrogance. Egyptians, both in Cairo and on the ground in Yemen, tended to look down on Yemenis, viewing them and their country as “primitive.” Yemeni officials were required to make frequent trips to Cairo to see how a properly ordered society should function. They traveled to Cairo to receive instructions and directives and to Moscow for training. This is similar to the problems Ahmad Nu’mān had in getting Egyptian universities to accept his “certificates” from Yemeni schools in the late 1940s, which we looked at in chapter three. Ferris calls this the Egyptian problem of “ignorance, arrogance, and prejudice.” Although most of the primary sources composed years later by the participants aren’t this explicit, it doesn’t take much reading between the lines to pick up on the lopsided power dynamic between Egyptians and Yemenis, and the Egyptian popular press as well as literature of the time freely dealt in these stereotypes of an underdeveloped Yemen. For instance, Yahyā al-Mutawakkil, a nominal Egyptian ally, details in his own memoir his trips to Cairo, including the time he was arrested in 1966. “I was expecting to go to the officer’s club,” he explained. Instead he was taken off to jail. Nasser seemed to believe that only Egyptians could make Yemen’s revolution successful, and this belief trickled down to the troops and officials who spent time in Yemen.

Even as late as 1966, Nasser was still saying: “We consider the Yemeni revolution our revolution.” Some of this, no doubt, came from a place of genuine concern. Egypt, after all,

85 Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 57.
86 On Egyptian popular views of Yemen as a “wild” and “primitive” land see Bahā’ Tāhir’s novel *Qālat ḏuḥā*; Dresch, *Modern History*, 93. These views were similar to those taken by the Ottomans, as well as the more contemporary views of Yemen taken by Americans. See, for example, Kuhn, *Empire, Islam, and the Politics of Difference*.
had succeeded in its own revolution a decade earlier. But the Egyptian approach in Yemen left very little room for local agency and often ignored local dynamics and realities. The Egyptians controlled the cities with a brutal hand, often acting in ways that were at odds with Yemeni norms and traditions. At times they executed innocent individuals, while at other times they lashed out in collective reprisals that did more harm than good in much the same way that US involvement in Vietnam or Soviet intervention in Afghanistan turned the population against the occupiers.  

Perhaps the most obvious example of this came in 1965 when Nasser placed al-Sallāl, Yemen’s internationally recognized president, under house arrest in Cairo. The haughtiness of Egypt’s bureaucrats transplanted in Yemen was matched only by the incompetence and indecisiveness of Egypt’s junior officers on patrol in Yemen. Both aspects of what this chapter terms “temperament” contributed to Nasser’s military defeat in Yemen.

As we’ve already touched on above, another challenge that Egypt was never able to contend with successfully was Yemen’s complex tribal structure. Nasser wanted to remake Yemen as a modern Republic and in order to do that he simply disregarded whatever didn’t fit. That meant that, for the most part, Yemen’s tribes were never fully incorporated into what, by 1964, had emerged as essentially a nation-building project in Yemen. To begin with, as we saw in Part I, the tribes had historically resisted centralized government and centralized rule. Even under Imāms Yahyā and Aḥmad the northern tribal confederations – the two wings of the imāmate – had a large degree of autonomy. As Ferris notes, “this is why the enormous investment in building a modern republic from scratch … seems to have done next to nothing to win over the rebellious Zaydī tribes … On the contrary it did much to deepen their

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90 There is a whole field of literature on this subject. One of the most perceptive works that touches on violence in civil wars, including those involving outside powers is Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
91 See Ferris, *Nasser’s Gamble*, 181 – 183, for a fuller discussion on Nasser’s decision making and how outside influences, such as his failure in Syria, impacted his thinking on Yemen.
resentment.”⁹² Although Royalist tribal memoirs are relatively few, even the memoirs from Republican tribesmen such as ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar and Sinān Abū Laḥūm illustrate the intricate deal-making necessary for winning over tribes for a particular operation. As we will see in chapter seven, al-Aḥmar does this throughout the summer of 1967 as he attempts to stave off a Royalist advance in the wake of the Egyptian withdrawal, dealing with each tribe, sub-tribe, and clan as he moves through their territory.⁹³ The Royalists, of course, were doing something similar in conducting their own deals with separate tribes. Many of these treaties, as we have already noted in Rāziḥ, were outside of the larger Royalist-Republican conflict and were conducted instead between the sayyids and their own tribes.⁹⁴ Interestingly, for the bulk of these war years, al-Aḥmar’s memoirs are relatively silent on his role, dispatching with much of the fighting in a handful of pages. Instead, much of his focus in the years from 1962 – 1966, at least as recorded in his memoir, is on the various tribal conferences: ‘Amrān, Ḥaraḍ, and Khamr. This in itself speaks to the difference in how the Egyptian military and the Yemeni Republicans saw the conflict. For the Egyptians it was a bifurcated conflict: Republicans versus Royalists. The Yemeni Republicans took a much more nuanced view. Many of them, including al-Aḥmar, al-Zubayrī, and others, were willing to sit down with ostensibly Royalist fighters to talk. And this is the important distinction. The Egyptians saw their enemy as the Royalists writ large, while the Yemeni Republicans understood themselves to be fighting the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty and by extension (and secondarily) the imāmate, which had given rise to the dynasty. Their enemy was not the other Royalist tribes. And while the Republicans would and did fight the Royalist tribes they also understood what the Egyptians never did: they could never defeat the tribes, that is wipe them out. This will become more obvious in Part III. The tribes were an integral part of

⁹² Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 182.
⁹³ al-Aḥmar, Mudhakkirāt 127 – 134.
Yemen, and Egypt’s failure to account for the fluidity within the tribal system that would permit a tribe to be Royalist at one point and Republican at another, as well as the Egyptian decision to bypass the entire tribal structure played a large part in its eventual defeat. Whether Nasser and his military high command considered the tribal system too complex to manage or simply too much of an anachronistic throwback to a less civilized time – likely, it was viewed as both – the Egyptian military failed to account adequately for tribal power in Yemen, which in turn hastened its defeat.

It is important to note one other key difference between the Republicans and the Royalists when it came to attracting tribal support. The Royalists relied heavily, as we saw above, on financial support from the Saudis. Much of this money was dispatched through traditional channels: from the imām to a prince, to a regional commander to a local agent and then to the people. Weir outlines this money and supply line in Rāziḥ. Part of the reason for this, of course, was that the Saudis were eager to have, however thinly veiled, the cover of deniability. The Republican finances, on the other hand, were largely controlled by the Egyptians, who were much more hands-on in distributing cash. This meant that the Royalist side, which understood Yemen far better than the Egyptians, was putting the money where it could do the most good and buy the most support. The Egyptians didn’t fully trust their Republican tribal allies and, as a result, al-Aḥmar and others often struggled to come up with enough cash and arms to win over wavering tribes.

The Ramadan Offensive in early 1963 had been a tactical success but a strategic failure, as noted earlier. As soon as the Egyptians moved in, the Royalists scattered only to return after the Egyptians moved on. For as many troops as the Egyptians had in the country, they still didn’t have enough to occupy every mountain and wadi. A year after the offensive, in early

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1964, the Royalists had recovered to the point that they were able to cut the road from Ḥudaydah to Ṣanʿā’, which was Egypt’s main artery to the Red Sea. That counteroffensive, along with increased activity in al-Jawf, led to Egypt’s second largest military operation in Yemen: the Ḥaraḍ Offensive. Unlike the pincer movement of the Ramadan Offensive, this was a series of armored thrusts out of three key cities: Ṣanʿā’, Ḥaraḍ, and Ṣa’dah. Dana Adams Schmidt, the New York Times correspondent, calls this the “largest of all (the Egyptian) operations,” and Pollack says “in some ways (the Ḥaraḍ Offensive) was even more impressive than ‘Āmir’s operation” a year earlier.96 The offensive was also notable for the fact that ‘Alī bin Ḫusayn, one of the Ḫamīd al-Dīn princes, was killed in the fighting.97 One of the goals of the Ḥaraḍ Offensive was to either capture or kill Imām al-Badr, and one of the Egyptian advances was aimed at his headquarters. The imām escaped over the border to Saudi Arabia, and the Egyptians eventually ground down against a combination of tribal and mercenary forces, many of whom were British.98 As Pollack notes, the Ḥaraḍ Offensive “was essentially a conventional military campaign and so was doomed to cause only superficial damage at best.”99 When it failed to capture al-Badr, the offensive became a replay of the Ramadan one from a year earlier: a classic maneuver that looked great in a textbook but failed to accomplish much against an unconventional opponent on the ground.100 By August and September, only a few months after it had begun, the offensive was bogged down. Around the same time, as Egypt’s two best military punches proved ineffective, the Republican alliance, which had always been shaky, began to breakdown. Key figures such as al-Iryānī, al-Zubayrī, Nu’mān, and al-Aḥmar had all

96 Adams Schmidt, Yemen, 178; Pollack, Arabs at War, 54.
97 Adams Schmidt, Yemen, 178. ‘Alī Ḫusayn was the first Ḫamīd al-Dīn prince to be killed in action.
98 Adams Schmidt, Yemen, 180.
99 Pollack, Arabs at War, 54.
100 Adams Schmidt also notes (164) that one of the Egyptian objectives was to close the Saudi border. While this may have been an objective, it doesn’t appear to have been the primary objective, at least according to where Egyptian directed its troops. The supply route from Saudi Arabia over the border to Yemen was essentially a life support system for the Royalists that the Egyptians were never able to cut off.
grown tired of Egyptian haughtiness and military incompetence. Their efforts to break with their Egyptian allies and create a “third force,” is where we turn our attention now.

**Republican Splits**

The first cracks in the alliance between the Yemeni Republican and the Egyptians appeared in early 1963, barely six months after the coup. In April 1963, around the same time the Bunker peace agreement was being finalized, several Yemeni Republicans such as al-Zubayrī, al-Iryānī, and ‘Abd al-Salām Ṣabrah put together a new constitution and sent a delegation to Cairo to deliver it to Nasser. This was one of the earliest attempts by well-credentialed liberals in Yemen to reassert local control over a war that had been taken over by Egypt. Little came of this early attempt. Al-Aḥmar, who was part of the delegation sent to Cairo, skips it entirely in his memoir, and Dresch simply writes “a state of emergency was declared.”

Dresch’s easy dismissal is slightly misleading; a new government was formed – the third of the revolution – but little came of the constitution itself. The Republicans tried again in late 1963 at the conference in ‘Amrān, which we discussed above. It is important, however, to note that many sources date the beginning of what some call the “national opposition” (al-μuʿārqā ʿa l-waṭaniyya) to the ‘Amrān Conference. Still, the decisive split wouldn’t come until a year later, in late 1964, after Nasser’s trip to Yemen in April of that year, his own attempt at writing a constitution, and the failure of the Ḥaraḍ Offensive.
On December 11, 1964, al-Zubayrī, al-Iryānī, Nu'mān, and al-Aḥmar all resigned their positions in al-Sallāl’s government. The four all had impeccable Republican credentials and their resignations were a serious blow to al-Sallāl’s government, the fifth he had formed in just over two years. Almost immediately the men called for another conference, modeled on the one in ‘Amrān, to be held in Khamir in May 1965. Together the men represented what would come to be called a “third force,” which here means essentially anti-Egyptian Republicans, those who wanted an end to the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty and the imāmate but were also wary of Egyptian influence and al-Sallāl’s leadership. Al-Zubayrī formed what he called The Party of God, Ḥizb Allāh, and in early 1965 started a long circuitous journey along with al-Iryānī to drum up tribal support. By late March, al-Zubayrī was in Jabal Baraṭ, traveling on his mule along with four bodyguards. On April 1, 1965, he was assassinated in Dhū Ḥusayn territory having just come from Dhū Muḥammad’s region. The shaykhs of Dhū Ḥusayn, the Āl Shāyif family, were Republicans, but most of the tribe was Royalist. Still by this point in the war, the list of al-Zubayrī’s enemies had grown to include not only the Royalists and the Egyptians, but also al-Sallāl himself. The assassins were eventually caught, but they were just the triggermen. It was never clear who, if anyone, ordered al-Zubayrī’s assassination. In his memoir, which is conducted as an extended interview, Yaḥyā al-Mutawakkil says he doesn’t believe either al-Bayḍānī or the Egyptian intelligence services had anything to do with al-Zubayrī’s death. Still, he says, the Egyptian high command was not sad to learn of al-Zubayrī’s death, particularly as it

105 Adams Schmidt, *Yemen*, 224 – 225, al-Zubayrī was the deputy prime minister for education and the media; al-Iryānī was the deputy prime minister for justice, foreign affairs, and religious endowments, Nu’mān was the president of consultative council, and al-Aḥmar was the Minister of the Interior.


108 Dhū Muḥammad’s main shaykh was Amīn Abū Ra’a’s, see al-Aḥmar, *Mudhakkirāt*, 99.

came while he was calling people to the conference at Khamir. That conference took place as planned but, absent al-Zubayrī’s unifying presence, it descended into bickering and backbiting and no deal was ever reached. Amīn Abū Ra’s attended under pressure and many of the Royalists stayed away. Khamir ended much as ‘Amrān had two years earlier, a host of resolutions and a new constitution that came to nothing. Once again, the proposed international delegation of shaykhs went nowhere; 37 of them were detained in Egypt when they tried to meet with Nasser. But Nasser was already aware that his strategy in Yemen wasn’t working. In August he met with King Fayṣal of Saudi Arabia in Jiddah, where the two hammered out an agreement along the lines of what Bunker had proposed in early 1963. Nasser would withdraw Egyptian troops and Fayṣal would end aid to the Royalists, which were using Saudi cash to strengthen their tribal support in the highlands and supplying their British-trained mercenaries.

The various Yemeni factions, which now included Royalists as well as two separate Republican camps, weren’t invited to Jiddah. Instead, ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm ‘Āmir was dispatched to Yemen to mediate between the different Republican factions, and everyone was instructed to gather at Ḥaraḍ for a peace conference. For several days in November 1965, dozens of shaykhs, both Royalist and Republicans, met at Ḥaraḍ in northern Yemen to discuss a possible deal to end the war. By this point, however, distrust among the various sides was so great that staunch Republicans like Sinān Abū Laḥūm sat with the Royalists, while non-tribal Republicans were so worried about the conference that they started “registering names” to fight for what they

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110 Nāshr, Yahyā al-Mutawakkil, 70.
111 For details of the conference see the various memories of the participants, Abū Laḥūm, al-Yaman, 117 – 125 and al-Aḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 101 – 103.
112 Dresch, Tribes and Government, 251 -252.
113 See al-Aḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 104 also Dresch, Tribes and Government, 252.
114 The details, speeches and documents of the Ḥaraḍ Conference are all included in the book: ‘Abdullāh al-Ḥusaynī, Mu’tamār Ḥarāḍ, NP, Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1966. The book makes it clear that Ḥaraḍ was the Yemeni portion of the Jiddah agreement between Nasser and Fayṣal.
called the true Republic in the event the conference was a success. It wasn’t. The Ḥaraḍ Conference was likely the last and best chance for a negotiated settlement between the Royalists and Republicans, overseen by the Egyptians and Saudis, but like the conferences at ‘Amrān and Khamir the one at Ḥaraḍ ultimately failed. There were still too many loose ends; Egyptian troops were still in the country, the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes were still using Saudi cash to drum up tribal support, and there were still a number of foreign advisers and mercenaries helping the Royalists.

The failure of the Ḥaraḍ Conference demonstrated what should have been clear for years: neither Egypt nor Saudi Arabia could dictate terms. Just as the two countries struggled to control their proxies in Yemen, so too were they incapable of ending the war on their own timetable. The coup had been carried out by Yemenis, and only Yemenis could bring the war to an end. The various Republican factions had formed largely in opposition to Egypt’s heavy-handed involvement in Yemen, and they wouldn’t come back together until – as we will see in chapters six and seven – the Egyptians were gone and the war was once again between Yemenis, who would be fighting for the version of the state they wanted to bring into existence.

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On Abū Lahūm sitting with the Royalists see his own explanation about internal competition among the Republicans, Abū Lahūm, \textit{al-Yaman}, 164; on registering fighters see Dresch, \textit{Tribes and Government}, n. 21 273.
This chapter, the second and middle one in Part II, focuses on the foreign involvement in the Yemeni civil war. Primarily, as we have seen, this meant Egyptian troops and aid on the side of the Republicans, and Saudi support through munitions and money for the Royalists. The British were involved from Aden and, as we will see in chapter 7, the Soviet Union also played a key role. This outside support was instrumental in allowing the war to go on as long as it did, but when it was removed as happened briefly in 1965 and again in 1967 the war did not end. This fact illustrates what was true on the ground. Namely that the Yemeni Civil war was actually two wars: a local conflict between the Royalists and the Republicans, which can itself be subdivided into smaller and smaller conflicts, and a regional proxy war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The end of the latter, as we will see, did not necessarily mean the end of the former. Although this chapter is largely concerned with the time from 1966 through 1967, basically from the publication of Britain’s “white paper” in February 1966 to the Egyptian and British withdrawals from Ṣan‘āʾ and Aden, respectively, in November 1967, it also dips back in time to touch on earlier events from 1962 through 1965, further developing the arguments that were first introduced in chapters four and five. One thing that becomes clear through this study is the way in which war creates its own momentum.¹

The first section of this chapter lays out how Britain’s decision to involve itself in the Yemeni civil war was the result of two separate factors. First, there was a strong desire within the Colonial Office to give Nasser a “bloody nose.” The Egyptian president had embarrassed the

¹ In this, as with many things, I’m indebted to extensive conversations with Richard P. Jordan, who defended his dissertation on momentum in war in May 2016 in Princeton University’s Politics department.
UK six years earlier in the Suez Canal Crisis and many within the UK government felt the Yemeni civil war was an opportune time to exact their revenge, prefiguring US calculations with regards to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The second reason for UK involvement, which grew to include both financial support as well as armed fighters and trainers on the ground, was a desire to protect the Crown Colony in Aden and the rest of the protectorate throughout South Yemen. At the beginning of the war in 1962, Britain anticipated remaining in Aden for the foreseeable future, for years to come. That calculation, however, changed quickly as Britain struggled with its own uprising. The next section looks at Saudi involvement in the war and its assistance to the Royalists. If the UK saw Nasser as a problem, Saudi saw him and the presence of Egyptian troops on its southern border as an existential threat to the kingdom. If Nasser wasn’t stopped in Yemen, the Saudi royal family was convinced he would move on the kingdom next. In such an environment, the Saudis did all they could to support the Royalists, providing significant amounts of funding as well as a rear base where Royalists princes could retreat in times of trouble.

The middle part of this chapter focuses on the Six Day War and the political fallout from Egypt’s quick and stunning defeat. Only with the defeat to Israel in 1967 did Nasser only fully realize how far off course he had drifted in Yemen. Instead of the few weeks he had originally anticipated, large portions of his army had been tied down in southern Arabia for nearly five years, weakening him both at home and abroad. Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s decision to send troops to Yemen in September 1962 was intended to be a limited engagement for a limited duration. As we have seen, it didn’t remain that way. One decision led to another, which in turn led to another and the end result of all of these little decisions was one big fact: the Egyptians were deeply involved in a local civil war with no clear exit strategy. When the initial
troops were deemed insufficient more troops were sent, and very quickly the mission of assisting a fellow revolutionary republic to find its feet evolved into a more open-ended conflict. Egyptian officers went from aiding to leading the war effort and in the process alienated many of the same individuals who had once welcomed them. As Paul Dresch writes, Egyptians “seemed convinced that Yemenis were incapable of conducting their own affairs and, as journalists noted, spoke of them in the racist fashion the British once used of Egyptian peasants.”

In a different context and a different war T.E. Lawrence, the British political officer, warned against exactly this type of behavior, writing: “Better (they) do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them.”

Nasser and his officers never learned this lesson and it proved to be their undoing in Yemen. Within three years of arriving in the country they found themselves opposing many of those they had initially come to help. Indeed, as we will see below and in chapter seven, for a period of two years Nasser had most of Yemen’s government under house arrest in Cairo. First, it was al-Salāl from 1965 – 1966, and then when he returned to Yemen, al-‘Amrī, al-Iryānī and the rest of the men that had taken over the government in his absence flew to Cairo to protest, where they themselves were promptly placed under house arrest in late 1966. Egypt’s decisive defeat in June forced Nasser back to the negotiating table with Saudi Arabia, where he was compelled to concede much of what he had won two years earlier. In the span of a few months in the summer of 1967, Nasser experienced three profound failures: losing to Israel, fleeing Yemen, and letting the British off the hook.

This chapter also argues that the traditional dichotomy between Royalists and Republicans when it comes to tribes in Yemen is misleading. Although some tribal figures such

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2 Dresch, Modern History, 93. Incidentally, this theme of Yemen as a wild country is repeated in Egyptian literature of the 1960s and 1970s and when this author spent time in Egypt in 2010 and 2011 I was repeatedly warned by well-meaning Egyptians against traveling to Yemen.

as Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Ĥmar were staunchly Republican from the beginning, very few tribes remained firmly on one side or the other. Theirs were not ideological commitments, but rather something else altogether. It was common for tribes to move back-and-forth between the two poles of Royalist and Republican, depending on the circumstances and advantages that could be garnered at any given time. What this looked like on the ground, as the Egyptians found out, was a complicated patchwork of ever-shifting alliances. This chapter explores this dynamic through the prism of a recruiting trip al-Ĥmar took in the summer of 1967, after the Egyptians had announced their intention to withdraw. Al-Ĥmar’s goal was to get the tribes and sub-tribes to “open up” their territory for Republicans to travel through. This was a time-consuming and delicate process in which separate deals had to be made with each sub-tribe and, at times, with individual clans. Some of these intended agreements were alternately helped or hurt by the existence of pre-existing deals, some of which dated back to imāmic times. The ebb-and-flow of tribal loyalties during the war illustrates why the simple Royalist versus Republican divide is often more confusing than it is illuminating.

The final section of this chapter deals with the withdrawal of Egyptian troops and the end of Saudi financing. The Saudis and Egyptians both declared the war over, but the Yemenis went on fighting. Indeed, the crucial and deciding moment of the civil war – the local part of the war – as we will see in chapter seven, took place after outside support had officially ceased. As the Egyptian troops were leaving Ṣan‘ā’ in November 1967, “opposition Republicans” who had been in exile abroad flooded back to Yemen to reconnect with those who had remained at home. For a brief moment that fall Yemen’s various Republican factions coalesced around ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Irānī in opposition to President Sallāl. But the same personality conflicts and plays for power that had hampered Republican efforts for years remerged as soon as the common
enemies that had united them faded away. This middle chapter of part II ties together the arguments of chapter five, dealing with the international actors, primarily Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UK, while introducing the Republican divisions that will be featured in chapter seven and which set the course for the new republic in the post-war world.

**British Involvement**

In February 1966 with little warning the British abruptly declared that they would be withdrawing from Aden. The UK would abandon the base it had spent years building, and there would be no defense agreement with whatever independent government came next. The British were washing their hands of South Arabia, and when they left so would the country’s covert aid to the Royalists. As we saw in chapter five, the British along with the Saudis came to the aid of the Royalists almost immediately after the 1962 coup. Initially, although the Foreign Office favored recognizing the new Republic, Britain’s policy in supplying the Royalists stemmed from two distinct yet complimentary goals. First, and perhaps most importantly, Britain wanted to give Nasser “a bloody nose,” after the Suez Canal crisis in 1956. Second, the colonial office was worried about protecting Aden in the face of Egyptian military involvement in north Yemen.

Within two weeks of the coup, British intelligence was already positioning itself for action against the Republicans. Later that fall, in November, a British party was seen just north of Ṣanʿā’. This timeline, of course, tracks quite closely with the beginning of Egyptian involvement in the north, and it can be argued with certitude that British support was a reaction

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5 One example of just how hurried the British withdrawal from Aden was can still be seen in the new cemetery the British started in the early 1960s after the old one ran out of room. The new one was sprawling, taking up a great deal of space on the outskirts of Aden; only a few years – 1964, 1965, and 1966 – can be seen on the tombstones there. The rest of the space is still unused and empty, a cluster of graves at the center of the complex, one more testament to the end of empire – author’s observation on Remembrance Day 2004 in Aden.
6 See the discussion in Dresch, *Modern Yemen*, 91.
7 This comes from a cable in the files of Kennedy Trevaskis, a British colonial official in Aden who later became governor. See Dresch, *Modern Yemen*, 237 n. 7.
to Egyptian intervention rather than a reaction to the coup itself. At the time of the coup, many in the British government believed that Nasser’s “top political priority was to rid the Arab world of the relics of British domination.” Only a few years out from the end of World War II, Britain was still adjusting to post-war life and in 1962 had few plans for divesting itself of its empire. That, as we will see below and in chapter seven, changed incredibly quickly. In 1962, Britain still thought of itself as a pre-war imperial power, when in reality it was already in the decline of the post-war years.

The Colonial Office won the internal British debate, outmaneuvering the Foreign Office, and securing support for Imām al-Badr and the Royalists. But there was a caveat. British support would remain covert. Much of this stemmed from a desire to avoid the sort of messy break-up with the US that had characterized the Suez Canal Crisis in 1956. This was particularly so since in December 1962, President Kennedy recognized the new republic as the official government of Yemen. Britain designed a two-tiered approach to aiding the Royalists, both of which could remain, if not secret, then at least officially deniable. First, the British started to send supply trains of mules and camels up through Bayhān, where it partnered with the local sharīf, Ḥusayn, to aid Royalist forces. Second, the British started supplying off-the-books soldiers – often termed mercenaries – to help train and lead Royalist forces. One of the men tasked with this was David Smiley, who later wrote a memoir about his experience in Yemen titled Arabian Assignment. Among the other Brits that would eventually either fight or travel with the Royalists was the travel writer and explorer Wilfred Thesiger and the scholar R.B. Serjeant. As Smiley’s memoir makes clear, he undertook his “assignment” at the request of the British government, not merely as a soldier-of-fortune who fought for the highest bidder. Smiley and

9 Quoted in Dresch, Modern Yemen, 61.
his men, while deniable assets, were official British policy. Smiley’s official cover was that he was in Yemen working as a journalist for the Daily Telegraph.\textsuperscript{11}

Reflecting British policy, Smiley and his men seemed more concerned with killing Egyptians and driving them out of the country than they did with restoring Imām al-Badr to power. For instance, Smiley ordered his men to fire at the Egyptians, who could be recognized because they were “the only ones who wore trousers in Yemen.”\textsuperscript{12} The British partner in all of this, of course, was Saudi Arabia, which bankrolled much of the Royalists’ resistance. Shelagh Weir, writing about the tribes of Jabal Rāziḥ in the northern highlands, gives some indication of how this system worked. The Saudis gave money and arms to the imām and the rest of the Ḥāmīd al-Dīn princes then channeled it to trusted officials, who in turn handed it out to individual fighters.\textsuperscript{13} Smiley saw something similar, writing that “the Royalist soldier received pay from the imām through the local commander.”\textsuperscript{14} Some of the rifles shipped to Rāziḥ were even labeled “with crossed swords and palm trees,” the national emblem of Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{15}

If Britain was worried about Nasser, Saudi Arabia was petrified.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed it is instrumental to look briefly at how the US, Britain, and Saudi Arabia each reacted to Nasser’s overt military support to al-Sallāl and the Republicans in Ṣan‘ā’ and how geographical proximity translated into alarm.\textsuperscript{17} After World War II, the US had slowly begun assuming more of a leadership role both in the Middle East and around the world, supplanting Britain. But unlike

\textsuperscript{11} Smiley, Arabian Assignment, 118.
\textsuperscript{12} Smiley, Arabian Assignment, 126.
\textsuperscript{14} Smiley, Arabian Assignment, 147.
\textsuperscript{15} Weir, A Tribal Order, 282.
\textsuperscript{16} Saeed M. Badeeb, The Saudi-Egyptian Conflict over North Yemen, 1962-70, Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1986. Badeeb, who was close to the Saudi government, presents an overview on pages 46 – 51 of the depth of Saudi concerns from a Republican Yemen in the early 1960s and how the kingdom worried Nasser might use a foothold on the Arabian Peninsula.
Britain, the US was not an imperial power. It had alliances and treaties, but not colonies at least not in the same way or in the region.\textsuperscript{18} And, in the 1960s, it was locked in a Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union, which colored almost every action it took in foreign policy. Taken together, these two factors help explain why the US recognized the new Republic as Yemen’s official government in December 1962.\textsuperscript{19} Britain’s Foreign Office, as we have already seen, mirrored the US State Department in arguing for early recognition of the Republic in Ṣan‘ā’.

But unlike the US, Britain also had a Colonial Office. In the end, Nasser’s proximity to Aden and his troops in North Yemen pushed Britain into arming his enemies on the ground, the Royalists. Still, as eventually happened, Britain could withdraw from Aden. Saudi Arabia was in a different position. Where Britain saw Nasser’s involvement as a challenge and an opportunity, Saudi Arabia saw it as an existential threat.

Saudi Arabia was willing to do whatever it took to prevent Nasser’s foothold in Yemen from threatening. According to a book by the British journalist Duff Hart-Davis, a check for “several thousand (UK) pounds from Jeddah arrived in London every month”\textsuperscript{20} Thousands more pounds, often in the form of gold and guns, were distributed from Saudi where the money made its way down the wartime food chain to the tribesmen on the ground, who were willing to fight in support of Imām al-Badr. That support, as we touched on in chapter five, remained constant through the first few years of the war.\textsuperscript{21} But in August 1965, Nasser and King Fayṣal of Saudi Arabia agree to a ceasefire. By this point the war had dragged on for nearly three years and neither side had much to show for it. Yemen had been a complete loss for both countries. Egypt

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\textsuperscript{18} American Samoa is an unincorporated territory and Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory.
\textsuperscript{19} The UN followed suit, recognizing the Republic of Yemen, days after US recognition.
\textsuperscript{20} This money was for the British soldiers and “mercenaries” in Yemen, who were technically there to advise, not to fight. See. Duff Hart-Davis, The War that Never Was: The True Story of the Men Who Fought Britain’s Most Secret Battle, London: Century Books, 2011, 96. Although some of the claims in Hart-Davis’ book, including allegations of Israeli support, are not as well substantiated, this one tracks with other sources.
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had nearly 60,000 troops in the country at the time and mounted several large campaigns but had gained little other than large numbers of casualties.\footnote{The exact number has never been released.} Egypt could hold Ṣanʿāʾ and other large urban areas, but the highlands continued to be nearly impossible to pacify. After the ceasefire, the different Republican groups met the Royalists in Ḥaraḍ near the Saudi border. This meeting, which unlike most from this period is well documented, proved to be a key point in the war.\footnote{The proceedings of the conference were published in 1966. See ʿAbdullāh al-Ḥusaynī, Muʿtamar Ḥaraḍ, NP: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1966.} Had the various Republican sides been able to come to an agreement as their outside partners, Nasser and Fayṣal had, the war might have ended. But even without an agreement the conference is notable for two things. First, for the cross-conflict relationships that took place. For example, as was mentioned in chapter five, Sinān Abū Lahūm, the Bakīl shaykh who is often thought of as staunchly Republican, sat with the Royalists.\footnote{Dresch, Modern Yemen, 106.} The boundaries between the two sides was not, it seems, that impenetrable after all. Also notable was that the Republicans at the Ḥaraḍ conference were led by al-Iryānī not al-Sallāl, as the latter was still under house arrest in Cairo. Ḥaraḍ turned out to be a precursor to the Khartoum deal two years later: Nasser and Fayṣal came to an outside agreement that their allies on the ground in Yemen refused to honor.

But even after the failure at Ḥaraḍ, Nasser was given an unexpected boost when the British announced in a white paper issued in February 1966 that they would be withdrawing almost immediately from Aden. Re-energized and given the prospect of turning a costly defeat into a face-saving victory, Nasser elected to hold troops in Yemen until after Britain had fully withdrawn. But as is often the case, outside events intervened. Early in the morning on June 5, 1967, Israel launched a surprise attack on Egyptian airbases in the Sinai Peninsula. The massive air assault made quick work of the Egyptian air force, destroying most of the fighter jets before
they could get off the ground. Nasser had moved troops into the Sinai less than a month earlier, expelling the United Nations Emergency Force as he remilitarized the peninsula partly on the basis of faulty intelligence from the Soviet Union. Israel needed less than an hour to cripple the Egyptian military and assure itself of air superiority for the rest of the brief war that would reshape the Middle East. Shortly after Israel’s preemptive strike, at 9:30 in the morning, Jordanian troops in Jerusalem opened fire on Israeli positions. Israel replied in kind, but limited its troops to small-arms fire in hopes of keeping Jordan out of the rapidly expanding conflict. Less than two hours later, around 11 am, Israel sent a message to King Husayn, pledging not to initiate action if Jordan stayed out of the war. “The die is cast,” Husayn replied. Minutes later, Jordanian jets attacked Israeli positions north of Jerusalem. That evening, Israel opened a third front, attacking Syrian air bases near the Golan Heights. The war lasted six days. And when it was over Israel had crushed its Arab opponents and taken control of the Sinai Peninsula, Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. Borders would be redrawn and politics would move on, but the Middle East had changed.

On June 5, the morning of Israel’s surprise attack, Sinān Abū Laḥūm, the Bakīl tribal shaykh, was on his way to the airport in Beirut for a flight to Rome. When he heard the news of the Israeli air attacks on Egypt and Jordan the exiled Yemeni leader turned around and headed back to town. “I was scared of an Israeli raid on the airport,” he wrote years later. Abū Laḥūm was also worried about his wife and children who were in Damascus. Working as quickly as he could, given his poor relationship with Syrian officials, Abū Laḥūm got his family out of the country and had them join him in Beirut. In a meeting with the Egyptian ambassador days later, Abū Laḥūm was blunt about the reasons for the loss. “I’m telling you that Yemen bears 50

percent of the responsibility for the defeat because the Egyptian army is in Yemen suffering losses for unnecessary mistakes.\(^{27}\) That view was shared by Yemenis and Egyptians alike.

In Cairo, where he was under house arrest, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Iryānī told a friend he didn’t see the defeat changing Egypt’s position on Yemen.\(^{28}\) But within days it did. Even after nearly five years of war in Yemen, Nasser and his staff still didn’t have a great handle on the personalities at play. Yemen was still too chaotic and jumbled; loyalties shifted too often, and there were too many tribal shaykhs. Some of this was a result of Nasser’s deliberate weakening of al-Sallāl’s government and the imperious attitudes of Egyptian commanders on the ground, which helped further divide Republican ranks. But even without the Egyptians, the Republicans would have been a fractured force. There were just too many different factions with too many different goals. What had started as an anti-Ḥāmīd al-Dīn movement eventually lost all faith with the imāmate as a political-religious institution. Once that happened, those anti-imāmic sentiments were channeled into various forms of Republicanism – tribal, Ba’thist, and others – largely dependent on each individual’s background and political outlook. In the summer of 1967, the Republicans consisted of a pair of rival camps held together rather tenuously by the continued presence of the Royalists, their common enemy.

Shortly after the Six Day War, Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Āḥmar organized a meeting at Ma‘bar, a small city south of Ṣan‘ā’, for several shaykhs and their tribesmen. Under al-Āḥmar’s guidance the shaykhs agreed to “cooperate with Egypt and forget about the past.”\(^{29}\) They nonetheless renewed their call for the political prisoners like al-Iryānī, Ḥasan al-‘Amrī and others in Cairo to be released. The latest in a series of “conferences” and meetings that had been ongoing since al-Zubayrī’s break with the government two years earlier, this one mattered less.

\(^{27}\) Abū Laḥūm, *al-Yaman*, 237.
\(^{28}\) Abū Laḥūm, *al-Yaman*, 236.
\(^{29}\) Āḥmar, *Mudḥakkirāt* 127.
than most. By the time al-Aḥmar and the shaykhs from more than half-a-dozen tribes met it was already obvious that Nasser was drawing down his troops. In light of his defeat in the Six Day War, Egypt’s adventure in Yemen simply couldn’t continue.

Days before the Ma‘bar conference, at an Egyptian checkpoint outside Ṣan‘ā‘, al-Aḥmar received a letter from ʿAbd al-Qādir Ḥasan, the Egyptian commander in Yemen, stating that his men would be withdrawing from Ḥajjah, a key city northwest of Ṣan‘ā‘. This was the first step toward a complete Egyptian withdrawal. In Rome, Abū Ḭaḻūm heard similar news of 150 tanks and 15,000 Egyptian soldiers being ordered home. On the eve of the Six Day War, Egypt had nearly 40,000 troops or roughly 20 percent of its military in Yemen. A few months later, they would all be gone.

**Republican, Royalist and Deal Making in War Time Yemen**

It took Nasser several weeks to fully process his June defeat and realize what it meant for his effort in Yemen. When one of his generals made complete withdrawal from Yemen a condition for accepting a position on the new frontlines along the Suez Canal, Nasser was shocked. “And relinquish (the country) to al-Badr?” he reportedly interrupted. Two months later, on the eve of the Arab Summit in Khartoum in August, Nasser was still reluctant to give up on his dream of chasing the British out of Arabia and end what he called “monarchical reactionism”. “Even if our troops withdraw from Yemen,” he told a group of Egyptian officials, “we have prepared a special military force to go to Aden on January 9, 1968 to protect and

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31 Abū Ḭaḻūm, *al-Yaman*, 236.
33 Quoted in Ferris, *Nasser’s Gamble*, 269.
uphold Aden’s independence.” Nasser’s rhetoric, as was so often the case, didn’t match the reality on the ground.

While Nasser was trying to figure out a way to salvage something that summer from the years of fighting, al-‘Amrī, al-Iryānī, and the rest of the prisoners remained under house arrest in Cairo. In Yemen, the war went on much as before with trade back-and-forth and continued fighting. In Saudi Arabia, nine Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes met to coordinate strategy on how best to take advantage of what was obviously an Egyptian withdrawal. Notably absent from the family meeting was Muḥammad bin Ḫusayn, the best military strategist among the princes who was already in Yemen moving toward al-Jawf, where he would soon take a key town ahead of a march on Ṣan‘ā’. Muḥammad bin Ḫusayn’s march through al-Jawf illustrates a common theme in the war: tribes who were considered to be on one side (in this case Republicans) “opening up” their territory to opposing forces often in exchange for weapons or money. This is important to remember in discussing the war, that while overarching loyalties like “Royalist” and “Republican” are needed to make sense of what is happening across the country, to truly understand what is happening on a micro-level it is the tribal, and often sub-tribe or clan level, that matters most. In this case, the “opening up” of Republican territory allowed ‘Abdullāh bin al-Ḥusayn, one of the princes who had been at the Saudi meeting, to travel uncontested and join forces with his brother and outflank al-Ḥamār’s fighters, who were marching to head them off. Large scale military campaigns, which depend on coordinated movements by distinct units of men as the Egyptians learned, and as we saw in chapter five, were doomed to fail in Yemen. The

34 Quoted in Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 269.
36 Aḥmar, Mudḥakkīrāt 127.
37 Aḥmar, Mudḥakkīrāt 129.
coordination simply couldn’t be maintained because so many tribes understood their first loyalty
to be to their tribe and not to the state or their own side, be it Republican or Royalist.

On the other side, Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar was doing something similar, attempting
to “open up” space through which his fighters could move. Each of the local Yemeni sides
prioritized the building of these local alliances, something Egyptian troops never managed to
master. While al-Aḥmar was talking, Royalist princes like ʿAlī bin Ibrāhīm, who had also
attended the Saudi meeting, were already weaving their own way south from the border raising
tribal militias with calls to support the imām and chests of money. Making matters worse for al-
Aḥmar was that, as we saw in chapter five, al-Sallāl and the Egyptians continued their boycott of
al-Aḥmar’s tribal fighters. “They didn’t support us with a single bullet or even one riyal,” al-
Aḥmar complained.38 Convinced, probably correctly, that the Royalists had more money than he
did, al-Aḥmar did what he could to offset their advantage by cobbling together a series of
alliances with Republican-leaning shaykhs. Because so much of the war turned on these
agreements, it is worthwhile exploring this in slightly more depth. This process was relatively
similar for both the Royalists and the Republicans. For example with one Bakīl tribe, which was
divided into “tenths,” al-Aḥmar painstakingly worked out a series of non-aggression pacts with
several different shaykhs.39 Each shaykh represented only a particular portion of his sub-tribe,
and each “tenth” tended to have two shaykhs, which made for lengthy negotiations when time
was essential.40 Al-Aḥmar needed as many shaykhs and “tenths” as he could acquire, so his
fighters could have free passage, but he couldn’t waste so much time on any particular tenth or
shaykh that the whole would be jeopardized. This is how the war went in the north: tribes
looking out for themselves and putting together the best deal possible. This also helps to explain

38 Aḥmar, Mudhakkīrāt 131.
39 Aḥmar, Mudhakkīrāt 131–132.
both why there was so much switching back and forth between Royalists and Republicans, and why the terms themselves were often inaccurate or, at best, temporary labels. Shelagh Weir illustrates this further in relation to Rāziḥ, describing what she calls a “flurry of pact-making.”

Where he could, al-Aḥmar piggybacked on pre-existing agreement such as with the Arḥab tribe just north of Sanʿā’, where Ḥāshid had a long-standing arrangement, which prevented Muḥammad bin al-Ḥasan from pressing al-Aḥmar’s fighters from the south. “They wouldn’t open up their land for an attack on Ḥāshid and Ḥāshid wouldn’t open up its land for an attack against them,” al-Aḥmar explained in his memoir. This agreement, which had originally been signed before the outbreak of fighting in 1962, helped save al-Aḥmar at a crucial time when it appeared as though the Republicans were collapsing in the wake of the Egyptian withdrawal.

**Khartoum and the End of Egyptian and Saudi Involvement**

Nasser and Fayṣal were looking to reach an agreement at the Arab League meeting in Sudan. Worried that the two might not consult the local actors, Sinān Abū Lahūm organized a trip to Sudan in early August in an attempt to make sure the Arab League heard from the “opposition Republicans.” But Nasser, who was tired of all the various Yemeni factions, asked Sudan to prevent them from attending. Only al-Sallāl’s official delegation was allowed to attend the summit, which opened on August 29, 1967. While the public agenda was dominated by Israel, Nasser and Fayṣal met on the sidelines to discuss Yemen. Initially, Nasser suggested reviving the Jiddah Agreement from 1965, but Saudi Arabia, in a much better bargaining position than it had been two years earlier, refused to even discuss the proposal. Nasser came back with the beginnings of a deal that would eventually become the basis for the agreement.

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Egypt would withdraw its troops from Yemen in two phases. The first phase, from mid-September to mid-October, called for most of Egypt’s troops to converge on Ḥudaydah in preparation for the second phase, which was scheduled to run from mid-October to mid-December, in which all troops would leave Yemen on ships back to Egypt. Most painful of all for the Egyptian president, the December deadline for complete withdrawal meant that the final Egyptian soldier would be out of Arabia before the British left Aden in January 1968. As we will see in chapter seven, however, both the British and Nasser had to speed up their withdrawal. In exchange Saudi Arabia agreed to cut off funding to the Royalists. Both the Egyptian withdrawal and the end of Saudi assistance and patronage would happen concurrently. Nasser also managed to secure Saudi backing for a referendum to be held in Yemen three to six months after Egypt’s full departure. ⁴⁴ According to the terms of the deal, al-Sallāl would remain as president until the referendum, but with both Egypt and Saudi Arabia withdrawing troops and money from Yemen it is hard to see how either thought they had the leverage to secure this part of the agreement. In many ways, the Khartoum agreement illustrates the hubris with which both Saudi Arabia and Egypt approached Yemen. Both countries considered Yemen difficult to manage and direct, but also well within their own sphere of influence; Egypt as a fellow republic in the Arab world, and Saudi Arabia as a bordering state. At the same time, both, throughout the five years of war, disregarded local agency. This oversight goes a long way to explaining exactly why both Saudi and Egyptian policy failed in Yemen. Neither country got what it wanted. The monarchy was overthrown, but the Republic that took its place lacked the strength to project power externally.

Once the details of withdrawal had been worked out, Nasser and Fayṣal agreed to form a three-country commission – with Egypt and Saudi Arabia each selecting one representative and

⁴⁴ Ferris, Nasser’s Gamble, 292.
the third to be agreed on by both. This commission would travel to Yemen to investigate the situation before rubber-stamping the deal the two leaders had sealed in the Sudan. The tri-partite commission, as the three-man team became known, included the Sudanese prime minister and the Iraqi and Moroccan foreign ministers. Several exiled Yemenis, including Abū Laḥūm, rushed back to Beirut to make themselves available for an interview. The commission met with the Royalists abroad as well as exiled Republicans, but it neglected to travel to either Egypt or Saudi Arabia as part of its fact finding mission. The three ministers listened to several Yemenis vent and rage – including Abū Laḥūm, who asked how Yemen could function when most of its government was under house arrest in Cairo – but little prepared them for what awaited them on the ground in Ṣan‘ā’.

After the Khartoum agreement between Nasser and Faysal, al-Sallāl was convinced that Egypt was ready to abandon him. He denounced the commission and refused its request for an interview. Defying his order, the commission flew into the country on the plane of General Muḥammad Fawzi, the commander of the Egyptian armed forces, landing on October 3. At the same time, a group of protesters encouraged, some believe, by officials loyal to al-Sallāl gathered outside the Egyptian headquarters in Ṣan‘ā’ and started throwing stones. After repeated attempts to disperse the protesters, Egyptian troops opened fire, killing two and wounding several others. By the end of the day 30 had been killed and the tri-partite commission had fled the country. That same day a group of Yemeni army officers submitted a list of 15 demands to al-Sallāl, including a call for a new government. The embattled president quickly agreed to all of their demands, but it was already too late. Al-Sallāl had too many enemies, and with the Egyptians on their way out of the country, hardly any friends. Later that month al-Sallāl left Ṣan‘ā’ on a plane for the Red Sea port city of Ḥudaydah. The last Egyptian troops had

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abandoned the capital shortly after the tri-partite commissioners had fled, making their way northwest along the highway to Ḥudaydah and then the long trip home. Nasser’s war in Yemen was finally over. There would be no more last minute reversals, and no final troop surge like in 1966. In Cairo, Nasser completed the process by releasing Ḥasan al-‘Amrī, ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Iryānī, and the rest of the Yemeni government he had been holding under house arrest for much of the past year. Just like when al-Sallāl was released from house arrest in 1966, the former prisoners rushed back home. A year earlier the situation had been reversed. Then it had been al-‘Amrī waiting in Yemen for al-Sallāl to land after months of house arrest in Egypt. Worried about what the long-absent president would do once he was back in the country, al-Amrī had even attempted to prevent al-Sallāl’s plane from landing. This time, however, al-Sallāl made no such move. After five years of fighting, he seemed to know it was the end. Al-Sallāl had been too closely identified with Egypt and Nasser and for too long. Even his protest of the tri-partite commission had not been enough to put space between himself and Nasser. Fairly or not, most Yemenis saw him as “Egypt’s agent.”

Nasser’s withdrawal also meant an end to Egyptian aid, money and munitions that the Republicans desperately needed to continue their fight against the Royalists, and once they were gone the Royalists would lose Saudi support as well. The war, however, would go on despite the agreement between Nasser and Faysal.

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This chapter, the final one of Part II, focuses on the events surrounding the Siege of Ṣan‘ā’ in late 1967 and early 1968. Like chapters two and four in Part I, which explored the coup of 1948 and the coup of 1962, respectively, this chapters takes a close look at a key turning point in Yemeni history. If chapter two was the story of a failed coup and the end of attempts to reform the imāmate, and chapter four was about the end of the imāmate and the beginning of the civil war, then chapter seven is the story of the end of the civil war and how the trajectory for a weak central state was established.

This chapter focuses on three key events from late 1967 and early 1968. The first is the coup that overthrew ‘Abdullāh al-Sallāl, the Republic’s first president, in November 1967. The second is the siege itself, a protracted 70-day struggle that stretched from late November 1967 through early February 1968, and effectively ended Royalist resistance and decided the war for the Republicans. The third area of focus is the struggle for control of the state and the future of the Republic that emerged in the weeks and months following the siege, pitting Ḥasan al-‘Amrī, one of the heroes of the siege, against his good friend and ally ‘Abd al-Raqīb ‘Abd al-Wahhāb for the direction of the state. Along with several tribal shaykhs, al-‘Amrī favored what in Yemen constituted a traditional model with a dependent center and strong tribes, while ‘Abd al-Wahhāb wanted a modernizing centralized state with a strong national army, more along the lines of Egypt or Iraq. Put another way, the battle between al-‘Amrī and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb was a battle over one large public army or several small private ones.
In the first section I argue that the coup of 1967 was an attempt to reunite the Republicans. The president, al-Sallāl, was too closely identified with Nasser and the Egyptians, who were in the process of withdrawing from Yemen in the wake of their Six Day War defeat. In this context, al-Sallāl functioned as a convenient scapegoat for a revolution that many felt had been hijacked by Nasser. Overthrowing al-Sallāl was a way of reclaiming the Republican revolution as a purely Yemeni project. Although, as we will see, this didn’t stop the post al-Sallāl Republicans for petitioning Nasser for military support to continue the fight against the Royalists. It is noteworthy that Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar decided not to be part of the three-man presidential council that followed al-Sallāl’s ouster. Even though he was a key figure in the planning of the coup, al-Aḥmar elected to remain outside of government. This chapter argues that al-Aḥmar’s decision helped to lay the foundation for the Yemeni state that exists today, a state that does not hold a monopoly on political power or the use of force. Yemen’s tribes also wield considerable political power, and they distribute it through their own processes and institutions, which remain outside of state control. The decision by al-Aḥmar to rely primarily on his tribe for his power and political prestige not only established this as a Republican precedent – though it had existed in some fashion under the imāms – but it also weakened the potential strength of the central government by establishing a rival power center. Al-Aḥmar was in some sense continuing and reinforcing patterns of shaykhly power and patronage that pre-dated the Republic, although the imāms had never permitted shaykhs to have quite the influence al-Aḥmar managed to acquire in the years after the revolution.¹

In the middle part of the chapter, I focus on the 70-day Siege of Ṣan‘ā’. This battle, I argue, did two things. First, along with the coup, it helped reunite the Republicans, focusing the

¹ Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar didn’t have a constitutional theory or model of decentralized government, but rather this resulted because of his desire to maintain an independent base of power that was his alone.
attention of the various factions on a common enemy. Second, it decided the fate of the civil war. Like the coups of 1948 and 1962, the Siege of Ṣanʿā’ was a key event that shaped Yemen’s future trajectory. In this case, it broke the back of Royalist resistance. Like the rest of the war, the siege was not simply a binary conflict between Republicans and Royalists. The battle lines were more fuzzy and blurred than is often assumed. “Royalist” tribesmen who besieged the city also traded with its townspeople. The war had created not only its own momentum but also its own economy, and in the process it had become a source of wealth for the tribes. In this context, it is easier to understand why the tribes who joined the Royalist commander Muḥammad Ḥusayn in the mountains around Ṣanʿā’ did not deliver the knockout blow when they had the opportunity to do so in December 1967. In addition to the economic incentives to prolong the war, or at least prevent it from ending, the tribes were also dealing with a breakdown of imāmic order. By the time the siege started in late 1967, Imām al-Badr had been in exile for nearly two years. Instead of leading his troops into battle as a “man of the sword,” he was resting in Saudi Arabia. This, as we saw in Part I, is in direct contrast to his father and his grandfather, as well as some of his uncles such as al-Ḥasan bin Yaḥyā. Although both Yaḥyā and Aḥmad eventually stopped leading troops into battle, they each were able to fall back on a history of personal experience, which al-Badr did not have. In late 1967, Muḥammad Ḥusayn, a young but experienced prince, was leading the Royalists. Still, the 30-year-old prince wasn’t the imām, and it was unclear whether the tribes with him were fighting for him, his family, some vague notion of the imamate or the monetary inducements he provided.

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2 Perhaps the best overview of war economy and momentum that prevents the end of a conflict is Princeton University graduate student Richard Jordan “War has its own momentum: How windows of opportunity prevent negotiated settlements,” unpublished paper shared courtesy of the author. Jordan, who has recently taken a position in Baylor’s Politics department, will soon be publishing the paper.
Most tribesmen, as we saw in chapters four and five, were fighting more out of tradition and a desire for personal wealth than for anything else. This is exemplified in the differences between how Muḥammad Ḥusayn’s men approached the battle in 1967 and how Imām Aḥmad’s supporters had nearly two decades earlier in 1948. Once again, the parallels are instructive. In both cases, the imām was absent from the battle and a relative was in charge. But in 1948, under Ḥasan, the tribes attacked Ṣan‘ā’ and al-Wazīr’s men. By 1967, the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family had lost the support of most of the Ḥāshid confederation and the years of war had so changed the dynamic between the imām and the tribes that this time there was never an all-out attack on Ṣan‘ā’ as there had been in 1948. Whether this was an on-the-ground calculation that the resistance the Royalists were likely to face in taking the city would be too great, or whether this was simply a failure of leadership is unclear.3 But whatever the case the city never fell. On a smaller scale, Shelagh Weir documents something similar happening in Rāziḥ in the early years of the war. Sayyids, she writes, were so threatened by all the upheavals, that they started conducting a series of pacts, which they called treaties of solidarity (waraqāt al-taḍāmūn) between themselves and their tribes.4 Yemen’s entire social order was being up-ended, and in the process the relationship between the sayyids and the tribes, as well as between the imām and the tribes, was changing. The tribes who fought with Muḥammad Ḥusayn were drawn to Ṣan‘ā’ by gold and the promises of more wealth once the city fell, but those promises, while enough to draw them to the mountainous outskirts, weren’t enough to get them to storm the city. As we will see in chapter eight, the political fluidity of the tribes as they moved back-and-forth between

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3 One key difference between 1948 and 1967 was that in the latter there was an on-the-ground defense reading to defend Ṣan‘ā’.

the different sides, along with the breakdown in imāmic order, allowed for an easier end to the war.

In the final part of this chapter, we will return to the Republican side to explore the rifts that emerged in the weeks and months after the siege. The coup and the siege had helped to reunite the Republicans, but as soon as the common enemy disappeared cracks emerged once more. On the surface this was a struggle for control of the military between Ḥasan al-‘Amrī, the prime minister, and his military chief of staff, ‘Abd al-Raqīb ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, but it went much deeper than that. The fighting of 1968 between these two old friends was for the future of the Republic and the shape the state would take. The victory by al-‘Amrī meant that his vision of small, private armies and a weak central state that was dependent on tribes won out, and indeed this has been the model that Yemen adopted throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century. Only with ‘Ali ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ and the death of the old “wise men” such as Mujāhid Abū Shawārib, ‘Abdullāh al-ʾAḥmar and others in the late 1990s and early 2000s does this change. But other, more dramatic changes will follow the breakdown of this Yemeni system of a military strongman who relies on tribal coalitions as we will see in chapter nine. This chapter, like the conflict between al-‘Amrī and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, ends with the latter’s death in early 1969, just one year after the two men had fought together to save Ṣan‘ā’ and the Republic.

Several of the major strands at work in this chapter – the fluidity of cross conflict relationships between Royalists and Republicans as well as the divisions in the Republican ranks – had a determining impact on Yemen’s history. Each set the course for the path Yemen would tread, from the rise of Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī and ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ to that of the Ḥuthīs in the early part of this century. The trajectory of contemporary Yemen was set during the 1960s, and it is still playing out today.
Al-Sallāl’s End

In late October 1967, as the Egyptians were preparing to withdraw their troops from Yemen, President al-Sallāl traveled to Ḥudaydah. Ostensibly, his trip was the opening, domestic leg of a multi-country trip designed to find donors willing to make up for the loss in Egyptian aid. The unstated if equally important reason for the trip was al-Sallāl’s desire to gauge the mood of the Yemeni exiles pouring back into the country and to determine whether he had enough support to hold on to the presidency. Al-Sallāl met planes from Cairo, Damascus, and Beirut at the airport. The president was polite, welcoming back men he had once fought to expel, soliciting proposals on how to reform Yemen now that the Egyptians were leaving. Most of the exiles were similarly cautious, telling al-Sallāl that they, too, were ready to forget past differences. But within a few days the truth was obvious: al-Sallāl didn’t have enough allies to hold on to the presidency. Writing years after the fact in his memoir, Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Āḥmar claims that al-Sallāl knew that his days as president were over as soon as al-Iryānī landed in Ḥudaydah.

The years of dispute and division had left too much bitterness within the Republican ranks to be papered over by a handful of meetings in early November. The exiles who had broken with al-Sallāl years earlier along with their allies on the ground like Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Āḥmar wanted a fresh start. Much like what would soon happen with the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, al-Sallāl made a convenient scapegoat. Getting rid of him was a way for Yemenis to reassert local control over the revolution that had been controlled by the Egyptians. Al-Sallāl was strangely passive for a man who had engineered the coup against al-Badr and become the Republic’s first president. He didn’t cancel his trip and he didn’t put up much of a fight. As he

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5 Abū Laḥūm, al-Yaman, 269.
prepared to leave Yemen, al-Sallāl invited al-ʿĀḥmar onto his plane for a final word. Placing a hand on the 34-year-old tribal leader’s arm, al-Sallāl told him the fate of the republic was now on his shoulders. With that Yemen’s first Republican president flew off to Cairo to what would turn out to be years of exile, while al-ʿĀḥmar returned to Sanʿā’ to help organize the coup that would unseat al-Sallāl.

In Ṣanʿā’ the recently returned exiles joined forces with al-Sallāl’s domestic opponents. Shaykh ʿAbdullāh al-ʿĀḥmar hosted al-Iryānī and Muḥammad ʿAlī ʿUthmān at his house in Ṣanʿā’ for an early planning session. Even though al-Sallāl seemed to be acquiescing to the coup, the three still wanted to move fast. Al-Sallāl was scheduled to return shortly after the November 7 festivities in Moscow, marking the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Soviet Union. That was their window, and they wanted to organize the coup in a way that would reunite the Republicans instead of dividing them further. There couldn’t be any more bloodshed or open disagreements; the trio wanted a smooth coup with broad-based support. After the initial planning session at al-ʿĀḥmar’s house, they invited several other key players to a meeting across town to discuss the logistics of the coup. Al-ʿĀḥmar and al-Iryānī had already decided on the evening of November 5 as the earliest possible date for the coup, and now they rushed to get all the pieces in place. Al-Sallāl still had pockets of allies that needed to be either won over or neutralized. Utilizing the respective social status and networks of the men in attendance at the meeting, they dispatched several as envoys. Sinān Abū Laḥum, the shaykh from Nihm, traveled to Nihm tribal territory just outside of Sanʿā’ in a bid to ensure that none of al-Sallāl’s allies within his tribe would oppose the coup. Other plotters sent similar messages to their own tribes, in this way ensuring broad support for the new Republican regime. The way the Republicans

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7 ʿAbdullāh al-ʿĀḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 138.
8 ʿAbdullāh al-ʿĀḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 138.
9 Abū Laḥūm, al-Yaman, 269.
conducted the coup against al-Sallāl illustrates how poorly the Egyptian model had been grafted onto Yemen. Five years into the war, institutions mattered little. Identity, particularly tribal identity, still shaped one’s response to the political environment.

On Friday morning November 3, two days before the scheduled coup, al-Aḥmar and al-Iryānī convened another meeting ahead of congregational prayers, broadening the circle of planners to more than two-dozen. They organized three teams to lay the groundwork for the coup. Two military officers, Aḥmad al-Rahūmī and Muḥammad Jārallāh, were selected to inform various military units so the news of the coup wouldn’t take them by surprise like the 1962 coup had. Similar to what we saw in chapter four, the radio was once again a key target. The second team led by ‘Alī Abū Laḥūm was instructed to seize the radio station in Ṣan‘ā’ on Sunday evening and then broadcast a statement announcing the coup. The final team headed by al-Aḥmar’s close friend and fellow shaykh from Ḥāshid, Mujāhid Abū Shawārib, along with Nu’mān Rājiḥ, were tasked with seizing and securing al-Sallāl’s house. In many ways, the 1967 coup was a replay of the 1962 coup, which we looked at in chapter four. The same targets – the leader’s house and the radio station – were identified, but things that had gone wrong in 1962, such as poor communication within the military, were corrected in 1967.

Inevitably as al-Aḥmar, al-Iryānī, and the rest of the men worked to gain support and reunite the Republicans, word of the plot leaked. They had never meant to keep it a secret. Indeed, widespread support and foreknowledge of the coup was essential to their plan to reunite the Republicans. But there were also potential drawbacks. Although the Egyptian troops had already withdrawn from the capital in preparation for the boat ride home, Nasser still had agents in Ṣan‘ā’ and some of these picked up on what was about to happen. On November 3, the same day the plotters were meeting before Friday prayers in Ṣan‘ā’, Nasser met with al-Sallāl in Cairo,

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10 Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Faraḥ, Sīrat Mujāhid Abū Shawārib: Ṣaqr al-thawra wa-l-jumhuriyya
warning him of the impending coup. Al-Sallāl shrugged off the Egyptian’s warning. He didn’t mention that he had known this was likely to happen before he even left Yemen. Instead al-Sallāl simply said that he thought it would be best if he continued with his scheduled trip: first to Iraq, and then to Moscow and the fiftieth anniversary celebrations. On Sunday, November 5, al-Sallāl flew from Cairo to Baghdad. That same day the coup got underway in Ṣan‘ā’. Abū Shawārib and Nu‘mān Rājiḥ descended on al-Sallāl’s house. The radio station also fell peacefully. ‘Alī Abū Laḥūm and his tribesmen quickly secured the building not far from Bāb al-Yaman, and that evening, as planned, Ḥamīd al-‘Udhrī read out the announcement of the coup on state radio. Everything had gone smoothly. The coup had been peaceful and, as many participants noted in their memoirs years later, “not a drop of blood had been shed.” It was bloodless, one scholar noted in al-Sallāl’s 1994 obituary, precisely “because no one lifted a finger to defend him.” In Cairo, the Yemen embassy confirmed the coup to the New York Times, describing it as more of an “extension of the revolution” than anything else.¹¹ Yemen’s first president had lasted nearly five years.

Al-Sallāl received news of the coup in Baghdad, where he decided to remain, never traveling on to Moscow for the anniversary parade. In Yemen, the plotters announced the formation of a “Republican Committee.” ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Iryānī, the classically trained scholar and judge from the mountains of Banī Sayf nearly 100 miles south of Ṣan‘ā’, was selected to chair the three-man committee. He was simply “the best choice,” al-Āḥmar writes in his memoir, referencing the much-cited ḥadīth: “faith is Yemeni, wisdom is Yemeni.”¹² Muḥammad ‘Alī ‘Uthmān got the second spot, while the third seat, which may have seemed destined for al-Āḥmar, the third of the original plotters, was granted instead to Aḥmad Nu‘mān,

¹² al-Āḥmar, Mudhakkirāt, 138.
who was still in Cairo. This was an intriguing decision by al-Ḩmar to pass up political power within the government and it deserves some exploration.

In his memoir, written years later, al-Ḩmar explained that he didn’t want the seat for himself, as he preferred to remain outside the new government. The coup, he wrote, was planned in his “bedroom,” but he claimed he was only a “defender of the revolution and the republic,” regardless of whether he had an official position or not.\textsuperscript{13} Lost in Aḩmar’s careful protestations of honor and humility was a political calculation. He didn’t need an official position with which to shape the Republican alliance, he was “the chieftain of chieftains” (\textit{shaykh mashāyikh}) of Ḥāshid, a position that carried its own prestige and power. To accept a position in government may have actually weakened al-Ḩmar instead of strengthening him. It would have diluted his traditional and well-defined role as \textit{shaykh mashāyikh}. The decision by al-Ḩmar did two things. First, it kept the tribes separate from the government. Al-Ḩmar maintained a distinct power base outside of government, which would not only sustain him in times where he disagreed with Ṣan‘ā’ but also provide a model for political longevity in Yemen. He was not subject to elections or changes in government, but rather had a traditional and powerful base from which to enter national politics. The second thing al-Ḩmar’s decision did was to create a precedent for other actors who, like him, could amass a significant degree of political power independent of the central government. What this meant was that political power in Yemen was not granted solely through government positions. In other words, Yemen was not a state in which one was either a public official or a private citizen. Yemen, like many states, had a third category, private citizens with political power. In Yemen, both the state and the tribe could bequeath political power. Neither had a monopoly. In many ways, al-Ḩmar was simply expanding the traditional “king-maker” role of powerful tribal figures, one that we examined in chapter one, to take on a

\textsuperscript{13} Aḩmar, \textit{Mudhakkirāt} 139-140.
greater degree of political autonomy and influence in a new system. Under the imāms, the tribes had been limited – king-makers but never kings – al-Aḥmar’s decision would make sure they weren’t similarly constrained in the Republic. It was a decision that would have long lasting implications for the formation of the modern state of Yemen and how political authority is wielded.

In November 1967, shortly after the coup, the presidential committee selected Muḥsin al-‘Aynī, a short, dapper man who favored western suits, as the prime minister. A one-time Ba’thist, al-‘Aynī was also Sinān Abū Laḥūm’s brother-in-law. In his memoir, al-Aḥmar writes that al-‘Aynī was the “most prominent intellectual,” which seems to suggest that along with al-Iryānī, al-Aḥmar believed that al-‘Aynī stood for a key constituency within Republican ranks that needed to be represented. Two things stand out regarding al-‘Aynī’s selection as prime minister. First, is the obvious identity politics – al-Aḥmar and al-Iryānī’s collective feeling that the “intellectuals,” or what some might term “bureaucrats” – western dressed and trained – needed to be represented prominently in the new government, which of course was part of their goal to reunite the Republican ranks. Second, is al-‘Aynī’s relationship through marriage to the Abū Laḥūm family. The politics of marriage, integrating families into one another as a way of binding them together politically, was already established by the 1960s. Indeed, the imāms had commonly used it as a tactic to coopt potential enemies. But this concept, which we again see here, would be expanded in the 1980s and 1990s by ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ, making it incredibly difficult to remove him from power, as we will see in chapter nine.

The attempted reunification of the Republicans did not, in the end, completely succeed. The coup was a temporary solution designed to fix the more intractable problem of what the Republic would mean in practice. Still, for a brief moment in late 1967, it did exactly what al-
Aḥmar and al-Iryānī had hoped it would and brought the various Republican factions back together. The coup got the Republicans to stop fighting each other long enough to face the Royalists. Along with several others, al-Aḥmar was convinced the Royalists would attack Ṣanʿāʾ as soon as the Egyptians were gone. If the capital fell, so too would the Republic, he said.14 That battle, the 70 day Siege of Ṣanʿāʾ, is what we now turn our attention to.

**The Siege of Ṣanʿāʾ**

In the Yemeni highlands north of Ṣanʿāʾ, the Royalist princes waited for a signal from the new government of al-Iryānī. Initially, they had some hope that the coup along with the withdrawal of Egyptian troops and the end of overt Saudi support might lead to a negotiated settlement. By this point it appears as though the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family was willing to accept a constitutional imāmate such as had been proposed in 1948. But two decades later this was no longer an option. Dana Adams Schmidt, the *New York Times* correspondent who covered the war and later wrote a book about the conflict, argued that the ideal situation at the time was a “neutral transitional government,” comprised of what he termed moderate Royalists, by which he seemed to mean non-Ḥamīd al-Dīn figures and Republicans.15 But it was not to be. The Republicans under al-Iryānī had little interest in compromising and when this became clear the Royalists responded in kind. On November 12, one week after the coup, Aḥmad al-Shāmī, the Royalist Foreign Minister, gave an interview to Adams Schmidt in the Saudi port city of Jeddah. “If they won’t talk to us, we’ll have to fight them,” he warned.16 Already Muḥammad Ḥusayn, al-Badr’s cousin, was rallying tribes for a march on Ṣanʿāʾ.17 Much like Imām Aḥmad had done

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14 Al-Aḥmar, *Mudhakkirāt* 140
15 Adams-Schmidt, *Yemen: The Unknown War*, 298. For instance, he mentions both Aḥmad al-Shāmī and Najī al-Ghadr as examples of what he calls “moderate Royalists.” Interestingly, it seems even to someone like Adams Schmidt the idea of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family participating in a compromise government was already a non-starter.
17 For a full family tree of all of Imām Yahyā’s 14 sons and their sons, please see: http://www.hamidaddin.net/free/Almansur.htm
in 1948, Muḥammad promised the tribes that they could loot the city. “You’ll get your share in Ṣan‘ā’, he reportedly told them. The prince knew that this might well be the Royalists’ last chance to take the city and end the war. Muḥammad Ḥusayn and the rest of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes still on the battlefield were working against the clock. According to the Khartoum deal of August 1967, Saudi Arabia was supposed to cease all aid to the Royalists at the same time Egypt withdrew its troops from Yemen. By late November, Egyptian troops were out of Ṣan‘ā’ and massing in Hudaydah for the journey home. This gave Muḥammad Ḥusayn an opening. Thanks to the terms of the deal, the Royalists were still receiving aid from Saudi, and the Egyptians, while still in the country, weren’t in a position to help al-Iryānī’s new government in Ṣan‘ā’. This advantage wouldn’t last long, and Muḥammad wanted to move on Ṣan‘ā’ before the money disappeared. But it was another timeline that would prove just as decisive to the outcome of the battle and the war.

In 1967, Ramadan began on December 1, around the same time as the siege. As we saw in chapter five, fighting had taken place during Ramadan previously, most notably in Egypt’s famous “Ramadan Offensive” early in the war. But this time, the tribesmen who had followed Muḥammad into the mountains around Ṣan‘ā’ seemed reluctant to press their advantage. Perhaps, as O’Ballance argues, this was because many of them had “come to look upon the war as a welcome source of arms and money. They neither wanted the war to end, nor the imām to return.” Whatever the reason, this reluctance would have lasting consequences. Inside Ṣan‘ā’, the city was bracing for what was to come. On November 17, Royalist radio, which was broadcasting from Saudi Arabia, announced that Muḥammad Ḥusayn was moving toward Ṣan‘ā’

with a large force of men. Ṣan‘ā’ had heard it all before. The Royalists were often threatening to march down out of the mountains and take Ṣan‘ā’, but nothing ever came of it. Only five days earlier, it had looked as if there might be a ceasefire agreement. The Middle East News Agency, a semi-official Egyptian agency, reported that 20 Royalist shaykhs had met with Republican military leaders and agreed to a ceasefire. In Cairo, the new prime minister, Muḥsin al-‘Aynī, said the prospect of rapprochement with the Royalists had improved. Still, there were some in Ṣan‘ā’ who were worried that this time it might not be bluster.

‘Abdu ‘Alī ‘Uthmān, a young student who was living in Ṣan‘ā’ at the time recalls the tenor of conversations about what would happen in the wake of a full Egyptian withdrawal. “We were worried about an attack,” he said. The Republican army had dwindled as the Egyptians withdrew both troops and money, which had paid the salaries of Yemeni soldiers. O’Ballance puts the number of Republican soldiers in Ṣan‘ā’ at the time at around 3,500, while Adams Schmidt estimates 2,000. ‘Uthmān came to a similar figure, putting the regular army at less than 2,000 with about 6,000 members of the civilian force. Most outside observers believed that Muḥammad Ḥusayn had at least twice that many fighters, in addition to all the tribesmen he had been able to attract with promises of loot. In early December, the Republican prospects did not look good. They didn’t have enough soldiers or supplies to hold the city. How they managed then to hold the city and defeat the Royalists is as much a testament to breakdowns in the Royalist ranks as it is to Republican ingenuity. On the Republican side, it was mainly the student and civilian group known as the Popular Resistance Force (PRF) that offset the

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22 Author interview with ‘Abdū ‘Alī ‘Uthmān. Interviews took place over a series of years in May, June, and July of 2004, as well as in July and August of 2005 and again in July and August of 2006. All interviews were conducted at ‘Abdu ‘Alī ‘Uthmān’s office at the “old campus” of the University of Ṣan‘ā’. The author is very grateful to ‘Abdu ‘Alī ‘Uthmān for his time and assistance.
23 O’Ballance, War in Yemen, 192; Adams Schmidt, Yemen, 296.
24 Author interview with ‘Uthmān.
Royalists’ numerical advantage. Unlike the regular soldiers, the PRF didn’t draw a salary; they were locals committed to the defense of Ṣan‘ā’. Even those who didn’t remember the sack of Ṣan‘ā’ in 1948 had heard enough stories to know what was in store for them should the city fall. ‘Uthmān, who was in his twenties at the time, recalls the atmosphere in Ṣan‘ā’ in late November and early December. “We told the merchants that whatever money you need for food we will bring it, but we must have the food. The only thing we were ever really in short supply of was cigarettes.”

Outside Yemen, however, the dynamics of the war were still, even after five years of constant conflict, poorly understood. In the days before the siege started, one unnamed Arab diplomat took a helicopter tour of the country with a New York Times correspondent. Leaning over to the reporter, the diplomat declared himself “startled” by the fact that Yemen had so few villages. Instead, much of the northern highlands were dotted with single, mudbrick fortress homes, which were indigenous to Yemen but would have been out of place in Egypt or Iraq. The anonymous diplomat also expressed shock at how many men in Yemen carried weapons. “Now I see why Yemen has never been unified or pacified,” he said. “Too many roads, too many schools, too many policemen are needed.” Five years into the Yemeni civil war, and the country was still a blank map onto which outside powers attempted to impose their vision. This, as we explored in chapters five and six, is at the heart of the Egyptian failure in Yemen. On the surface, the September 26 coup looked a lot like the 1952 Free Officers revolution in Egypt, both were carried out by a small group within the military seeking to overthrow a monarch. But the similarities ended there. Egypt was a unified country with a capital that projected power outwards toward villages along and outside the Nile River basin. Yemen was much more.

25 Author interview with ‘Uthmān.
27 Ibid.
fracious and divided, not only by geography – the mountains limited movement, which is why
the radio became so important as a unifying factor – but also politically by the tribes. These two
challenges – geography and powerful tribes – made the central government in Yemen much
weaker than its counterpart in Egypt. The Egyptian military could never quite grasp this central
fact quickly enough: Yemen was not Egypt and by treating it as such the Egyptians doomed
themselves to failure. They flew into the revolutionary war in Ṣan‘ā’ in 1962 without proper
maps or a real understanding of the tribal structure. Five years later, as they were withdrawing,
not much had changed. The territory outside Ṣan‘ā’ was still largely unknown, and what was
known was poorly understood.\footnote{See, for instance, discussions of Nasser’s “Long Breath” strategy, which we discussed in chapters five and six, in
which Egypt solidified its hold on Ṣan‘ā’, Ta‘izz, and Ḥudaydah while abandoning the outlying tribal regions.}

 Barely a week after the New York Times article in late
November 1967, which suggested that the war was all but over, the Siege of Ṣan‘ā’ began.

Nearly 50 years after it took place, the Siege of Ṣan‘ā’ has taken on a mythic quality in
Yemeni public memory. Poems and songs are written about the battle, celebrating the brave
feats of the defenders of Ṣan‘ā’.\footnote{Perhaps the pinnacle of the art celebrating the Siege of Ṣan‘ā’ is ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Maqālih’s poem “The Heroes
and the Seventy,” which opens:}

What can I say
What can I possibly say about those people
What will I be able to write with my pen
 About the men on ‘Ayban
About the men on Nuqum
What about tomorrow
What kind of poems will I be able to write
What can I possibly publish in the papers

Institute for Yemeni Studies, Ṣan‘ā’, 2005.}

In this context, excavating what actually happened and
separating out the strands of history from those of popular imagination is a difficult task.
Thankfully, over the past decade, that has become easier as several observers and participants in
the siege have published their memoirs or have given interviews.\footnote{This, of course, has been done much more on the Republican side than it has for the Royalist side, whose account
of the war has yet to be written.} Yemen in late November
1967, as we have already seen, was a confusing patchwork of battles and armies. In the south, the British were pulling out after more than a century in Aden, leaving in their wake a messy and confusing conflict for control of a newly independent state. In the north, the Egyptian military had pulled back to the Red Sea port city of Ḥudaydah in preparation for complete withdrawal from Yemen. ‘Abdullāh al-Sallāl, Yemen’s first president, had just been overthrown, and al-Iryānī, the new president, was in Ḥudaydah. In Ṣanʿā’, a weakened Republican military tried to shore up the city in the face of what was rumored to be a Royalist advance, while Muḥammad Ḫusayn brought his fighters down out of the highlands.

In the aftermath of the November 5 coup, which overthrew al-Sallāl, and with al-Iryānī in Ḥudaydah and Nuʾmān resigning in frustration over the continued fighting, the Republican side was rife with what one historian calls “dangerous divisions.”31 ‘Umar al-Jāwī, a Republican figure who lived through the siege, put it succinctly: “It would be very difficult to say the Republicans resisting the Saudi-Royalist threat had a coherent position.”32 But if the Republicans were in disarray so too were the Royalists. Muḥammad Ḫusayn’s initial push on Ṣanʿā’ in late November 1967 found the city running dangerously low on weapons, ammunition, and supplies. If the Royalists had pushed into the city in the last few days of November or the first few days of December they may have been able to take Ṣanʿā’ and change the course of the war. Instead, the Royalists, as rife with divisions as the Republicans, sat in the mountains outside of Ṣanʿā’ and waited for the city to fall on its own. Much like al-Jāwī’s quote above, one Royalist supporter, in this case the noted British travel author, Wilfred Thesiger, said the

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32 Quoted in Dresch, Modern Yemen, 114.
Royalists could have taken the city “if it hadn’t been for internal dissension.” This, in the end, was the difference.

The Republicans, as divided as they were, only had to defend what they already held. The Royalists had to go on the offensive and take Ṣan‘ā’, and when that failed they lost, first the battle and then the war. Still, in early December 1967 as the siege was just beginning, this wasn’t immediately clear. Inside the city, Yaḥyā al-Mutawakkil describes the scene for the Republicans: “We did not have enough experienced armored forces or airplanes or tanks to counter the attacks of the Royalists or their mercenaries.” These Royalist attacks, however, were largely limited to rocket strikes from the mountains around Ṣan‘ā’. Muḥammad Ḥusayn never pushed his advantage. There are several possible reasons for this and numerous observers, both contemporary and later, have speculated as to why the Royalists remained in the mountains instead of rushing the city, which they almost certainly would have taken. Dana Adams Schmidt, the New York Times correspondent, suggests that perhaps the Royalists did not want to “risk all in an assault which might be broken by concentrated defensive fire on the plain immediately surrounding the town. An unsuccessful assault could be disastrous to the Royalist cause.” Edgar O’Ballance, another contemporary observer and writer of popular military histories, suggests that Muḥammad Ḥusayn had his own difficulties with ammunition. “Every bomb and shell had to be carried by a mule or a man for many miles over extremely difficult terrain.” A third issue was Ramadan, which started at the beginning of December 1967, roughly at the same time as the siege. Another factor was tribal motivation as well as the breakdown in imāmīc order, which we will explore below. Taken together these different factors

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33 Quoted in O’Ballance, War in Yemen, 194.
35 Adams Schmidt, Yemen, 296.
meant that almost by default the Royalists slipped into a wait-and-see approach, and this delay would prove costly.

Early Royalist shelling had managed to make the large Soviet-built airport on the outskirts of Ṣanʿā’ inoperable, but the smaller, older airport in Jiraf could still accommodate flights, and in early December Ḥasan al-ʿAmrī returned to the city after a year under house arrest in Cairo. Al-ʿAmrī stepped into a demoralized and nearly defeated city and almost singlehandedly saved it. As Dresch writes, he became the city’s “Napoleon.”

And like Napoleon one of the first things he did was seize complete control of the city and its defenses. Simply by being on the ground and taking control of what was largely a leaderless military in the wake of the Egyptian withdrawal, al-ʿAmrī forced himself back into the government and by December 18, with al-Iryānī still in Ḥudaydah, he was named prime minister, replacing Muḥsin al-ʿAynī. Al-ʿAmrī’s appointment and his concept of the Republic would, as we will see, have major implications for Yemen’s post-war future.

One of the first things al-ʿAmrī did, after surveying the state of the regular military in Ṣanʿā’, was to establish what would become known as the Popular Resistance Force. One of the members of the PRF, ʿAbdu ʿAlī ʿUthmān describes the process: “We were trained by the soldiers inside the city in things like how to use guns and the proper way to guard different buildings.”

ʿUthmān had spent much of the war in Cairo, but for him and others in the PRF there was a belief “that ‘the tribes’ could come to some accommodation with whomever won, whereas they, if they lost, would lose everything.” In other words, the tribes would adjust, but the PRF and the citizens of Ṣanʿā’ were fighting for their lives. Al-ʿAmrī implemented military law throughout the city, and the citizens – at least those who stayed – fell in line. “They knew

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38 Author interview with ʿUthmān, Ṣanʿā’
39 Dresch, *Modern Yemen*, 115. My interviews with ʿUthmān and others bear this out.
their very survival depended on the success of his measures,” Uthmān explained.40 “Every neighborhood set up its own local guard.”41 Another of al-‘Amrī’s actions would also prove decisive. Around the same time he was setting up the Popular Resistance Force, he sent Ḥasan Makkī, the foreign minister, to Moscow to negotiate an airdrop of supplies and weapons. The Soviets had been supplying the Republicans with some munitions and they eventually agreed to create an “air-bridge” from Moscow to Ṣan‘ā’.42 The planes couldn’t land at the large airport outside of town, but even without its use an average of 18 planes a day landed at the smaller airport at al-Jiraf. Together these two strands of the Republican resistance, the men of the PRF and the supplies from the Soviet Union, would give al-‘Amrī the strategic advantage he needed to hold on to the city. By the time Ramadan ended, near the end of December 1967, the Republicans were in position to defend Ṣan‘ā’. Muḥammad Ḥusayn had missed his chance.

The Republican tribes, particularly those of Ḥāshid under Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Āḥmar and Mujāhid Abū Shuwārib, played a limited role in defending Ṣan‘ā’ during the siege. The siege was primarily a battle between the city and its civilian defenders against the Royalist forces surrounding it. Part of al-Āḥmar’s experience, however, is instructive for understanding how porous the Royalist blockade of the city actually was. In November 1967, ‘Abullāh al-Āḥmar accompanied an Egyptian commander to Ḥudaydah before returning to Ṣan‘ā’ where he was wounded in a firefight in Ṣanḥān.43 Along with some other tribesmen, al-Āḥmar was able to enter Ṣan‘ā’ and spend part of the night at the hospital receiving treatment. The wound, however, was so slight that he left just a few hours later, slipping out of the city. The ease with

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41 Author interview with ‘Uthmān, Ṣan‘ā’
which al-Aḥmar came and went from Ṣan‘ā’ at a time when the Royalists had such a significant numerical advantage should serve to illustrate that the siege was never a complete blockade. Ammunition, food, and, most importantly, men were able to slip past Royalists lines with little problem. What couldn’t penetrate Royalist defenses, at least until the end of the siege, was large military equipment that would have had to come overland by either the road from Ḥudaydah or the one from Ta‘izz. The Siege of Ṣan‘ā’, then, is perhaps more accurately described as a Royalist road blockade, pinning down a city. But the ease with which individuals and trade, as we will see below, went back-and-forth suggests not only a lack of aggression on the side of the Royalists but also contradictory goals that divided that side. Muḥammad Ḥusayn was still fighting for the restoration of the imāmate, but many of the men with him seemed more bent on acquiring wealth whether through trade or plunder than any broader religious or political goals.

Besides al-Aḥmar, Abū Shawārib was in Ḥajjah where he was being pressed by Royalist forces after they had taken Ṣa‘dah. Sinān Abū Lahūm, a shaykh from Nihm, was in Ḥudaydah along with other key Republican leaders. Al-Aḥmar and Abū Lahūm both eventually returned to Ṣan‘ā’ while Abū Shawārib remained in Ḥajjah where he increased his reputation as an able/valiant fighter. The memoirs and biographies of all three men are full of the daily clashes and running battles that made up much of the war. But taken together they present a more complex picture of the siege than that of a city cut off and alone. Throughout the siege, as with the rest of the war, the different sides kept the lines of communication open. Abū Lahūm relates that on December 2, days into the siege when the Royalists were in a strong position, he was

45 Lahūm, al-Yaman, 276. Dresch, Modern Yemen, 106, makes the interesting note that although Abū Lahūm is often – and rightly – treated as a staunch Republican figure since he opposed Imām Ahmad for years – he actually sat with the Royalist delegation at Khamir and Ḥārid. This is just one more reminder that the simple bifurcation of Royalist – Republican breaks down the closer one gets to the events and personalities in question.
46 Dresch, Modern Yemen, 115.
meeting with Royalist leaders for talks. Similar things were happening with supplies. Although the popular image of Ṣan‘ā’ is of a city under siege, reduced to scrimp and in danger of running out of supplies, there was actually a fairly brisk trade between Royalist tribesmen and the city dwellers they had surrounded. This was particularly true with qat, the mild stimulant that many Yemeni men (and more than a few women) chew daily. The revolution had already broken down some of the social barriers that had limited qat chewing to upper classes within Yemeni society. After 1962 qat consumption became much more widespread than it ever had been under the imāms. Despite the siege, the qat trade continued nearly unabated with traders bringing in their plants to sell in the morning to men they would shoot at later in the day. There were also frequent, although unofficial ceasefires, during the traditional afternoon hours of the qat chew. Similar trade also happened, although on a much smaller scale with food. Ṣan‘ā’ could produce at least some of its own food through the gardens in what is now the old city, but it also bought food supplied by nominally Royalist fighters. Other supplies, of course, were being airlifted in by the Soviets.

Inside the city, al-‘Āmrī placed ‘Abd al-Raqīb bin ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in charge of the “shock troops” (ṣā‘iqah), who fought several running battles with the Royalists under Muḥammad Ḥusayn. Abū Lāḥūm details one of these engagements, between ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s shock troops and the Royalists, on December 7, which Dresch dismisses as minor clashes masquerading as major battles. Nearly 50 years on, everything about the siege has taken on a level of drama and depth that seems absent from the original clashes. But besides al-‘Āmrī and a

47 Lahūm, al-Yaman, 276.
49 Author interview with ‘Uthmān, Ṣan‘ā’.
50 Author interview with ‘Uthmān, Ṣan‘ā’.
51 Abū Lāḥūm, al-Yaman, 277; Dresch, Modern Yemen, 115.
handful of other military figures like ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, nearly every other Republican figure of note was missing from Ṣan‘ā’. Al-Iryānī, who had taken sick, was in Ḫudaydah, as was Abū Lāḥūm, who had just been appointed governor of the port city and its governorate.52 Ḫasan Makkī and Muḥsin al-‘Aynī were both in Cairo, as was Yaḥyā al-Mutawakkil, while tribal figures like al-Aḥmar and Abū Shawārib were also elsewhere. It is worth noting that although many of these Republicans had opposed Egyptian involvement, they all found themselves in Ḫudaydah – and away from the siege in Ṣan‘ā’ – as the Egyptians prepared to withdraw fully from Yemen.

The Royalists’ military strategy, such as it existed, was basically to take and control the mountains that surrounded Ṣan‘ā’ and use the higher ground to squeeze the city into submission. That final push, as was already mentioned, never happened. But by early December the Royalists were able to control much of the high territory around Ṣan‘ā’. Muḥammad Ḥusayn directed periodic sorties out of the mountains and, one of these in early December, nearly succeeded in cutting off the 3rd Armored Division from the rest of the city. Had that dawn raid been successful, the Royalists may have been able to further infiltrate a weakened city, essentially breaching Ṣan‘ā’s defenses at the foot of Nuqum. But along with ‘Alī Muthannā Jibrān, whom Fred Halliday calls the “hero of the Siege of Ṣan‘ā”,” al-‘Amrī was able to push back the Royalist surge.53 Later that month, the 3rd Armored Division pushed up Nuqum, retaking much of the mountain from Royalist forces. The 10th Division, under Ṭāhir al-Sharī, retook al-Nahdayn, while the 4th Armored Division, which had been in Ibb, moved north into Banī Maṭar, pressing the Royalists from behind. In retrospect, it was these Royalist operations in

52 Abū Lāḥūm, al-Yaman, 276-278.
December that would prove to be the most dangerous to the city. Once they were repelled, the Royalists never again threatened Ṣan‘ā’ in the same way.

Around the same time the 4th Armored Division was moving north, al-‘Amrī also received reinforcements in the form of nearly 600 armed fighters from the National Liberation Front (NLF), a southern group that had been fighting the British in Aden.54 The Front for the Liberation of South Yemen, or FLOSY, also sent some men north to aid in the defense of Ṣan‘ā’.

More than Zaydīs, it was Shafi‘īs from both the North and the South who were rushing to the city to defend it from the Royalists. The southerners in particular viewed the Saudis and the Royalists as part of the same imperial problem they had been fighting in Aden. Once the British withdrew in late November, they were free to move north and continue the fight. By the end of December, al-‘Amrī had the supplies and men to defend the city. The Royalists made another push in mid-January 1968, but by this point it was becoming clear that the city was not going to fall. The Royalists didn’t press their advantage when they had it, and now it was gone. But the siege, or at least the blockade of the two major roads, was still in effect. The Republicans now focused their energies on opening the roads from Ḥudaydah and Ta‘izz. In both cities, local recruitment drives were organized to collect volunteers to travel to Ṣan‘ā’ to “defend the Republic.” After a slow start, the rest of the country was finally coming to the aid of the capital. In Ta‘izz, one of these volunteers remembers small groups, often acting on their own initiative, driving around the city with loudspeakers attached to their cars calling on young men to join the fight in Ṣan‘ā’:

All young people Ṣan‘ā’ is calling you
All young people Ṣan‘ā’ is under siege
The time to register is after dusk prayer

Muḥammad al-Murayt, a local volunteer who eventually joined the group from Ḥudaydah, described the difficulties of fighting their way inland toward Ṣanʿāʾ through territory often sympathetic to the Royalists. At times the men had to dynamite large boulders that had been placed to block the road, while at other times they were forced to repair the road or clear debris. The Royalists weren’t quite employing a scorched earth policy, but they were willing to destroy the roads in order to keep Ṣanʿāʾ cut off from the rest of the country. This restraint, as well as the limited shelling of Ṣanʿāʾ, can be read one of two ways. Either the Royalists thought they could still win the war and were concerned that they might cause too much damage and too many civilian casualties and in the process alienate potential allies, or they were concerned about post-war retribution should the Republicans emerge victorious. Although Muḥammad Ḥusayn claimed publicly that he sought to limit civilian casualties, his promise that the tribes would “get their share” in Ṣanʿāʾ suggests the latter reading.

The titular head of the Royalist contingent was Imām al-Badr, but as we have already seen he was ill and not even in Yemen at the time of the siege. Indeed, al-Badr had spent much of the past few years in exile in Saudi Arabia, which raised a number of questions as to his legitimacy as leader, the structure of the Royalist ranks, as well as to their internal unity. There was, of course, some precedent for an imām sending his army into the field under delegated authority. Typically this was a relative, such as when Imām Yaḥyā sent his son, Aḥmad, to fight the Saudis in 1934. Yaḥyā was old and in no shape to lead an army as traditional Zaydī practice suggested he should. Even in losing territory to the new kingdom of Saudi Arabia, he was able

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55 Author interview with Muhammad Ismaʿīl al-Murayt, March 4 and April 21, 2004 in Ṣanʿāʾ. The author wishes to express his gratitude to Muḥammad for sharing his memories of the siege with him in a very difficult time as he was bedridden during the last few months of his life and sadly passed away just a few months after these interviews.
to hold on to the imāmate until he died 14 years later. Aḥmad, too, at one point became so physically unfit as to be unable to lead his army, or indeed to remain in the country as imām, traveling to Italy in 1959 for treatment. But when he returned home to a government in chaos, he was able to quell the threat. Although, as we saw in chapter three, his response may in fact have held within it the seeds of a future revolt – the one in 1962. Al-Badr’s absence from the battlefield in 1967 and 1968 was more of a problem than either Yahyā’s or Aḥmad’s, both because of the context as well as his own personal history. Neither Yahyā or Aḥmad had faced the type of existential threat that al-Badr did. Yahyā and Aḥmad had each dealt with internal challenges, but these were challenges of style not substance. The imāmate, even during the attempted coup of 1948, was not being challenged as an institution. Besides, both Yahyā and Aḥmad had a personal history of leading their troops in the field: Yahyā after taking over from his father and fighting the Ottomans, and Aḥmad as crown prince in the late 1920s, in 1934 and again, to a certain degree, in 1948 as he avenged his father. Al-Badr had none of their collective experience. He was viewed as soft, neither a man of the pen nor of the sword, as Zaydism required. When the troops came, he was reported to have slid down the bathroom chute and escaped the city dressed as a woman. Whether the story is true or not is, in some ways, immaterial. What matters is that it was believed and reflected the general impression about the mettle of the man. Yemenis believed al-Badr may well have dressed himself as a woman to save his own life. This was not the action of an imām or a strong leader to whom the tribes could rally as they had to Yahyā and Aḥmad. As we saw in chapter three one of the keys to Aḥmad’s seizing the imāmate in the aftermath of his father’s assassination in 1948 was his personal appearance and ability to rally the tribes in Ḥajjah. Al-Badr was never able to do this.
With an imām in name but not in practice, the Royalist cause was split. Yahyā’s sons and grandsons had spread throughout the country, attempting to rally the tribes to their banner. But there was no unanimity of thought or mission. The princes, as they still called themselves, were trying to get the tribesmen to fight for a vague and distant institution instead of a person who commanded respect: the imamate under al-Badr had become depersonalized. This was something it had traditionally avoided by shunning hereditary succession, but with the rise of the Ḩamīd al-Dīn dynasty in the twentieth century the institution of the imāmate was weakened. The imāmate became synonymous with one family and once that family grew weak so too did the institution.

Early in the war, when it was believed that al-Badr had died in the shelling of his palace, Ḥasan bin Yahyā assumed the title of imām, but once al-Badr reappeared he backed off. Ḥasan in all likelihood would have been a much stronger imām than al-Badr turned out to be, but whether that would have made any difference to the outcome of the war is yet one more of history’s unknown counterfactuals. Hasan retracted his da‘wa for the sake of internal unity, and in the process left the Royalists without a strong imām. The tribes who fought for the Royalists did so initially out of habit and tradition, then out of personal loyalty to the prince in their area and finally, as the war dragged on, they fought for personal wealth.

In early 1968, as the relief columns of fighters and equipment made their way from Ta‘izz and Ḥudaydah toward Ṣan‘ā’ this is what they were facing: tribes eager for loot. Most of the relief groups carried not only weapons and ammunition, but also gold and cash, which is what the tribes were after. Al-Murayt, one of the members of the party from Ḥudaydah, details the confusing nature of these clashes at a time when it was far from clear who supported whom. Indeed, by this point, many tribes seemed to be less Royalist or Republican than simply on their
own side. Checkpoints appeared on the road, snipers fired down from the mountains, and the armed guards accompanying the column were often drawn off into running clashes that left the relief party unprotected. A common ploy was for the tribes to lure the armed guards away from the column, and then circle back to grab what plunder they could before the guards returned. These tactics, while delaying the columns, speak more to tribes looking for money and weapons than an enemy intent on defeating the other side.\(^5\) None of this, of course, is unique to Yemen. As civil wars drag on, whether in America in the 1860s or Yemen in the 1960s, battle lines tend to blur and armies break down into bands of robbers and pillagers as the war nears its messy conclusion.\(^6\)

The same thing was happening in the mountains around Ṣan‘ā’. Muḥammad Ḥusayn’s men were divided and, as O’Ballance, writes: “They simply wanted to sit back on the heights around the capital, waiting like vultures for someone else to do the breaching of the defenses.”\(^7\) That, of course, never happened. And for the few mercenaries and soldiers of fortune still with the Royalists after the end of covert British support, it was a frustrating experience. Wilfred Thesiger, the famed British travel writer and explorer, was in the mountains around Ṣan‘ā’, as was the scholar R.B. Serjeant. Muḥammad Ḥusayn did his best, but all his promises of loot and plunder that had drawn the tribes to Ṣan‘ā’ couldn’t force them down out of the mountains.\(^8\) He wasn’t the imām and the tribes weren’t an army. There was no clear command-and-control

\(^5\) Author interview with al-Murayt, Ṣan‘ā’.


\(^8\) There were some later claims that Muḥammad Ḥusayn had a “known opposition to looting,” which “made for difficulties with the tribes whose main interest is to get on the military payroll and into a favorable position to loot.” Muhammad even claimed that he had “deliberately held back his tribesmen to avoid massacre and looting in the capital.” But these claims, coming as they did after the siege, suggest a post facto revision in which Muḥammad was trying to save face. The bulk of the evidence suggests that the 30-year-old prince was simply unable to convince the tribes to attack. For these claims see Dana Adams Schmidt, “Royalists in Yemen Move to Mount New Drive in 6-Year War,” *New York Times*, March 15, 1968.
structure, and without it the Royalists floundered as January slipped into February and each day brought the relief columns closer.

At the head of one of these columns was Shaykh Aḥmad ‘Abd Rabbu al-‘Awāḍī, who Dresch describes as “a fighter and a fierce man with a bottle, he was also a poet whose songs … remain famous.”60 Al-‘Awāḍī led a group of 1,500 fighters out of al-Bayda’, and Sinān Abū Laḥūm along with many others credit him with breaking the siege.61 The end came on February 8, 1968, when the column from Ḫudaydah blasted its way through the last few roadblocks and into Ṣan‘ā’. The Chinese engineers, part of the same team that had originally built the road in the 1950s, proved crucial, “throwing a steel span across a damaged bridge at a critical moment.”62 The Royalists in the mountains had them under fire until the very end, but they never came down out of the mountains to fight. The same indecision that had plagued them from the beginning stayed with them until the end. As the relief parties drove into Ṣan‘ā’ the Royalists slipped away. The siege was over, and the Royalists were all but defeated. The poor and fractured leadership of the Ḫāmīd al-Dīn princes combined with the growing economic incentives of a protracted conflict ultimately couldn’t compete with a state ideology that had both the capital as well as many of the leading shaykhs of the time.

Republican Splits

After the Royalists were defeated, the veteran French journalist Eric Rouleau wrote that the Republicans quickly found themselves fighting on a second front: combatting fellow Republicans. On one side was what Rouleau termed the “leftists,” who had joined the Republicans in fighting off the Royalists only to turn on them once the battle was over, and on

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60 Dresch, Modern Yemen, 115.
61 Abū Laḥūm, al-Yaman, 293.
the other was what he called the “traditionalists.” Indeed, if late 1967 and early 1968 saw a battle between the Royalists and Republicans for Ṣan‘ā’ and the country, the rest of 1968 became a fight between two Republican factions – the leftists and the traditionalists – for control of the fledgling Republic. The two sides would come to be defined by their leaders, ‘Abd al-Raqîb bin ‘Abd al-Wahhâb on the left and Ḥasan al-‘Amrî with the traditionalists. Now that the siege was over, the two heroes of the 70-day fight for Ṣan‘ā’ were locked in a struggle for supremacy. A common enemy had held the two sides together, and once that threat disappeared the alliance fragmented. On the surface it was about control of the military, which is why a dispute over military supplies eventually sparked the fighting. But that was only a means to an end. The conflict was really about the future of the Republic. ‘Abd al-Wahhâb favored a centralized state with a strong army, while al-‘Amrî and his tribal allies favored the more traditional model of a dependent center and strong tribes. This was a battle over one large public army or several small private ones.

Al-‘Amrî and ‘Abd al-Wahhâb had once been close friends, and the dissolution of their relationship hit both men hard. They had fought together and bled together, and within a few months those bonds fell apart. Prior to their dispute, al-‘Amrî had even intended to marry his daughter to ‘Abd al-Wahhâb, joining the Zaydî right with the Shafi‘î left. But their conflict

64 The divisions and terms are a bit contested. “Right” and “left” as Dresch writes, “does little justice to what was happening here. See Dresch, Tribes and Government, 274 n. 25. Although often this – right v. left – was the language the participants themselves used to discuss the conflict between ‘Abd al-Wahhâb and al-‘Amrî. See, for instance, Ṣâdiq Nâsh, Yahyâ al-Mutawakkil, Ṣan‘ā’: Markaz al-‘Ubadî: 2003, 100. Others, like Halliday, import western categories like “anti-capitulationist left” to describe the sides, piling qualifiers on top of qualifiers.
65 Dresch, Modern History, 117. Part of the problem in defining the conflict is that it wasn’t just one conflict. It was several wrapped up as one. For instance, Dresch writes: “others saw the conflict as primarily between Upper and Lower Yemen, marked by origins and accents.”
66 This is interesting and notable in that al-‘Amrî is from a qudat family not a shaykhly one and this identity alone would seem to suggest that he would favor a centralized state with a strong standing army. That he didn’t speaks to the shifts in war and how he made common cause with Shaykh al-Aḥmar and others to outmaneuver ‘Abd al-Wahhâb. In war it is often the primary enemy that becomes the most important.
67 Dresch, Modern History, 117.
soon made that impossible. How much of this was a result of blundering and how much the result of calculated political maneuvering is open to debate. Dresch claims that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb was a good soldier but “scarcely a politician;” al-‘Amrī was both. Both men had their allies. Siding with al-‘Amrī were tribal figures like Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar, Mujāhid Abū Shawāriḥ, ‘Alī al-Maṭarı and, most importantly for what was to come, Sinān Abū Lahlūm. On ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s side were men like Amīn Abū Ra’s, as well as soldiers like ‘Alī Muthannā al-Jibrān and Ḥamūd Nājī, the head of the paratroopers. The bureaucrats and Ba’thists like Ḥasan Makkī and Muḥsin al-‘Aynī fell somewhere in the middle, although most of them leaned toward al-‘Amrī’s group, not because of his position of a weak centralized state – one would think that intellectuals and technocrats would prefer a strong state – but because he was stronger and more likely to win. But they left themselves enough space to side with whoever came out on top. The president, al-Iryānī, if he had a side, favored al-‘Amrī, but he along with much of the rest of the government was largely irrelevant to the showdown.

The first clash between the two Republican factions took place just weeks after the siege ended, in March 1968, in the Red Sea port city of Ḥudaydah. The Soviets had sent yet another shipment of arms and tanks that was due to dock at the port on March 22. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s allies, or at least men claiming to act on his behalf and allied with the Movement of Arab Nationalists, or MAN, attempted to seize the shipment. One of Al-‘Amrī’s backers, Sinān Abū Lahlūm, was already in Ḥudaydah as governor, and he soon added Muḥammad Faqīḥ as the military commander. Ṣanʿā’ was roughly in the center of the country, which meant that – just as in the siege – it was often dependent upon Ḥudaydah and Ta‘izz for supplies that weren’t airlifted in. Ḥudaydah was by far the most important of the two, a port city that could handle

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large ships. If al-‘Amrī refused to distribute supplies, ammunition, or hardware to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s shock troops, he could essentially suffocate them. And by the beginning of March it looked like this is what he was doing. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb took a trip to Ḥudaydah in an attempt to get his own man installed as the military commander of the city, who would have access to the ports. But when that failed he returned back to Ṣan‘ā’.

The clashes started on March 16. Al-‘Amrī was in Ḥudaydah, ostensibly preparing for a trip to Cairo but his visit also coincided with the arrival of a Chinese ship, and these are worth sketching out to illustrate the tenuous back-and-forth in the weeks after the siege.69 Al-‘Amrī’s men took control of the shipment, and the prime minister traveled on to Cairo. Three days later, on March 19, a Russian ship carrying 50 tanks arrived at the port. This time ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s men took control of the ship and “banned anyone from entering the port.”70 Al-‘Amrī rushed back from Cairo, arriving in Ḥudaydah on March 21, at which point he stormed the port with what Abū Lahūm would later call “violent force.”71 The fighting eventually fizzled out, but the underlying problems remained and simmered throughout the spring and summer.

Although weakened and outgunned, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb still had a number of units loyal to him and the battle for control of the state was far from over. In late July, at a meeting between al-‘Amrī and a number of prominent tribal shaykhs including ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar, a consensus was reached: al-‘Amrī would purge the military of officers of questionable loyalties.72 On August 15, al-‘Amrī put his plan into motion, using a ploy that ‘Alī Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ would later make famous. First he announced his resignation only to rescind it two days later in the face of

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69 Abū Lahūm, al-Yaman, 308.
70 Ibid, 308.
71 Ibid, 308 – 309. For a time Abū Lahūm and al-‘Amrī were at odds, as al-‘Amrī’s men even fired on the governor’s residence and al-‘Amrī later called for Abū Lahūm’s resignation. This, as with so much else in the war, pushes back at some of the outside narratives of two sides, however defined. Dresch, as we have already seen, lists Abū Lahūm as al-‘Amrī’s man in Ḥudaydah but the situation on the ground was much more complicated than two rival factions within the Republican ranks.
72 Halliday, Arabia Without Sultans, 123-124. Noticeably, this meeting is absent from al-Aḥmar’s memoir.
popular protests in Ṣan‘ā’.

Al-‘Amrī was testing the waters ahead of what was to come. On August 19, he arrested ‘Alī Muthannā al-Jibrān, removing him as the head of the artillery and replacing him with one of his allies.

Three days later, on August 22, the real fighting started. Muḥsin al-‘Aynī, the former prime minister, called it “the peak of tragedy for the Republicans.” Yaḥyā al-Mutawakkil said this was when “the reigns of power slipped away from them and the situation exploded.” For the next three days, the two sides battled it out with tanks and mortars. Men who only six months earlier had been defending the city together were now tearing it apart as they attempted to kill each other. In Aden, international journalists tried to make sense of the reports, calling it a “coup” and putting the death toll in the thousands. The damage, while not on that scale, was still extensive, particularly for a city that was still recovering from a lengthy siege. When the dust finally settled, al-‘Amrī was in control. He exiled ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and 22 others to Algeria, under the thinnest of fig leaves, calling it a “training exercise.” In an effort to heal some of the wounds that had been opened by the fighting, al-‘Amrī sent some of his own men to Algeria, dividing up the 22 by sect: 11 Zaydīs and 11 Shafi’īs. The final act came in January 1969. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb returned to Ṣan‘ā’, where he was soon killed. Although there were early reports that ‘Abd al-Wahhāb shot himself at home in Ṣan‘ā’ it seems clear that he was killed by al-‘Amrī supporters. In his memoirs, Abū Laḥūm notes that he received a telegram stating that

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73 Abū Laḥūm, al-Yaman, 327.
74 al-‘Almar, Mudhakkirāt, 167-168.
75 Al-‘Aynī, Khamsūn, 140.
76 Nāshr, Yaḥyā al-Mutawakkil, 97.
78 Halliday more soberly puts the number of dead at around 300. Dresch illustrates the confusion of the moment in an anecdote about future president ‘Alī Abdullah Śaliḥ, who was remembered as tank driver “motoring along ‘Abd al-Mughīnī street in Ṣan ‘ā’ … and shelling point-blank such symbols of leftist progress as the pharmacy and Bilqīs cinema.” See, Dresch, Modern Yemen, 247 n. 72.
79 Many scholars of Yemen often claim that the country is not sectarian, and while that was largely true prior to 2004, it was never as if Zaydi or Shafi’ī were labels without meaning.
‘Abd al-Wahhāb had been killed. “I am publishing the text of the telegram without comment because I was in Ḥudaydah and far away from the events of the telegram,” he notes. It was a sad end for the two men who had saved Ṣan‘ā’ and the Republic only a year earlier. They had gone from a proposed marriage of their families to blood enemies in that short time. Al-‘Amrī won, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb died, and, as we will see in part III, the course of the Republic was set.

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80 Abū Laḥūm, al-Yaman, 349.
Part III:
The Republic
(1970 – 2014)
This chapter deals with the three decades between the end of the civil war in 1970 and the beginning of the Ḥūthī wars in 2004. Along with chapter nine, this chapter forms Part III, which examines Yemen after the civil war, as the Zaydīs learn how to be Zaydī in the absence of an imam. That process includes the rise of ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Šāliḥ in the late 1970s, the reunification of north and south Yemen in 1990, another brief civil war in 1994 and, finally, in the early 2000s the rise of a group of Zaydī revivalists known as the Ḥūthīs. The first section focuses on the end of the civil war in north Yemen in 1970. In it we will examine how Royalists – with the exception of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family – became Republicans. This phenomenon is explored through the case of Qāsim Manṣūr, a Royalist commander from Khawlān, who joined the Republicans in the months after the Siege of Ṣan‘ā’ in 1968. Manṣūr’s defection is emblematic of a broader trend that did two things. In the short term, it allowed the fighting to stop with a minimum of reprisals and revenge killings. But in the long term, this incorporation of Royalist figures, including Zaydī sayyids, into the Republic prevented the war from ever truly ending.

The Republic had been formed and the imāmate destroyed, but it was never really clear what this meant for traditional Zaydīs in northern Yemen. They didn’t have to give up all their beliefs to become Republicans, though they could no longer support an imām. In time, as we will explore in the final section of this chapter as well as in chapter nine, that tension would again erupt in armed conflict. Seen in this light, the Ḥūthī wars of the early 2000s were, in many ways, a continuation of the civil war from the 1960s. The actors, of course, were different, but the issues that the civil war never settled were being contested by a new generation. The first section of this chapter also touches upon the new government in Ṣan‘ā’, which was struggling to find its
own shape and form as the civil war came to a close and as it wrestled with the question of what exactly makes Yemen “republican.” Following years of Egyptian influence and interference, Yemen knew it did not want to import Nasserism. But if it was not going to follow Egypt’s model, what model would it follow? The answer, it turned out, was something close to what al-‘Amrī had championed in 1968: a weak central government with strong tribal militias. Yemen’s third president, Ibrahīm al-Ḥamdī, attempted to alter this in the mid-1970s, strengthening what would later be called civil society, but he was assassinated and the cooperatives and councils that he had supported were later gutted by Šāliḥ.

The second section focuses on the Salafi push into the north Yemeni highlands, particularly in and around Ša‘dah, the traditional stronghold of Zaydī imāms. This incursion into the Zaydī heartland combined with government disregard throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s and, at times, outright hostility toward traditional Zaydīs led, as we will see, to a pushback by Zaydī revivalists. One of the primary individuals responsible for the Salafi incursion into Ša‘dah was a disaffected tribesman named Muqbil al-Wādi‘ī, who had grown up Zaydī before converting to Sunnism during a stay in Saudi Arabia. Al-Wādi‘ī in practice, if not in theory, became part of a two-pronged alliance of Salafis and other Sunnis working to eradicate the Zaydī heritage and traditions.

The third section deals with the rise of ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Šāliḥ and the consolidation of presidential and political power in north Yemen. By the late 1970s, following the pair of coups that ousted Yemen’s first two republican presidents and the assassinations that eliminated the next two, the republic was starting to look like an imāmate without an imām. The revolution and the civil war that followed, it turned out, hadn’t been anti-Zaydī, but rather anti-sayyid. The social order had been overturned, but the state remained a Zaydī state in the sense that the vast
majority of top officials – President Ṣāliḥ and Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Ḩmar to name just two – remained Zaydī in terms of cultural background and regional origin. The key difference, of course, is that neither relied on his Zaydī heritage for his position and they were opposed to the institution of the imāmate and the theological principles that undergirded it. But they remained culturally Zaydīs and hailed from regions that were historically the bastions of Zaydī rule. Ṣāliḥ came up through the military, which became the foundation of his rule. Shaykh ‘Abdullāh, on the other hand, was a tribal leader, who relied on the Ḥāshid tribal confederation for support. The revolution, in other words, had happened within Zaydism. Nominal Zaydīs still controlled the state and Shāfī‘īs still felt marginalized. Although the top office was theoretically open to anyone, not just sayyids, in practice it remained the property of Yemen’s elite from Upper Yemen or the northern highlands where Zaydism had been predominant. It was just that the social identities of the elite had changed. And because the sayyids had been part of this elite group for so long, many now started to play down their own heritage. The tense equilibrium of the 1980s, when the traditionalist Zaydī sayyids in Ṣa‘dah were largely left alone by the state, started to change in 1990 with unification and the increasing push of Salafis into Zaydī territory.¹

The Zaydī traditionalists found the state getting stronger and more capable of projecting power, while their own influence was further diluted by the addition of millions of southern Yemenis, none of whom adhered to Zaydism. Further complicating the matter were new “scientific institutes” and religious schools, many of which espoused a Sunnism at odds with traditional Zaydism, including al-Wādi‘ī’s school. In 1990, one group of Zaydīs formed Hizb al-Ḥaqq, which was intended to be a Zaydī political party that would represent the interests of

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¹ As we will see, the educational curriculum of the Republic had stressed Salafism and a generic form of Sunnism that played down madhhab (school) affiliation as early as the 1970s when the Saudis funded the Ministry of Education and helped recruit Muslim Brotherhood teachers, but it was only in the 1980s and 1990s that this emphasis from Ṣan‘ā’ began to make itself felt in the Zaydī strongholds of northern Yemen.
traditional-minded Zaydī thinkers while still disavowing the imamate. The party was also an attempt to neutralize the Sunni Islamic grouping known in as Islah. In retrospect, this was one of the last peaceful attempts to solve the problems created as a result of the civil war in the 1960s and the fall of the imāmate. But for many Zaydī scholars and thinkers the party was simply one more step along the road to religious extinction. What, then, did it mean to be a Zaydī in the absence of an imām? In the mid-1990s for those Zaydīs who still held to the historic principles of their school this meant resistance.

Section four of this chapter examines the roots of that pushback, why it was necessary and how it came about. Backed into a corner, both geographically and politically, and in fear for their cultural and religious heritage, the Zaydī traditionalists fought back. First, in the 1990s, there was pushback against the Salafi incursion and then, later, as they became a pawn in the capital’s political intrigues they led an armed uprising against the central government. This section explores the rise of the Believing Youth and the Ḥūthis from the late 1980s until 2000, a period in which Yemen underwent both unification and a brief civil war in 1994. This chapter argues that by 2000 the Zaydī traditionalists felt they had only one choice: armed resistance. The form that resistance would eventually take is the subject of the final chapter of the dissertation.

The Republic

The siege of Ṣan‘ā’, as we saw in chapter seven, was the Royalists’ last chance to restore the imāmate. When the siege was finally lifted in February 1968, the civil war was effectively over. The fighting would continue for months, as the Royalists retreated farther north into the Yemeni highlands. Without Egyptian troops or Saudi-backed mercenaries, the war became a local affair with Yemenis fighting Yemenis. In the aftermath of the siege, as the Republican side

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looked poised for victory, several Royalist tribes and commanders switched sides. As we have seen, even early in the war labeling tribes “Royalist” or “Republican” was often misleading and by 1968 it had become virtually meaningless.\(^3\) It was clear the balance was shifting in the highlands north of Ṣanʿā’. The two Republican stalwarts of Ḥāshid, Shaykh Muḥāhid Abū Shawāriḥ and Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-ʿAḥmar – men a Yemeni zāmil has described as the two mountain goats, or an Ibex, \((waʾl)\) and lords of Ḥāshid\(^4\) – were gaining strength and supporters along with the Republican government in Ṣanʿā’.\(^5\)

Ḥajjah, which like Ṣanʿā’ was under a rather porous siege from tribes fighting the Republicans, was “liberated” by Abū Shawāriḥ in early 1969.\(^6\) What was left of the Royalists’ resistance, which was still being commanded and coordinated on the ground by Muḥammad Husayn, was losing its small pockets of territory as its tribal allies defected. One of the key losses, and a case that illustrates this trend, was that of Qāsim Manṣūr, a longtime Royalist commander who defected to the Republicans near the end of the war. The Republicans had been trying to win Manṣūr over for years. In 1967, a delegation of tribal shaykhs led by Sinān Abū Lahlūm had traveled the few miles east of Ṣanʿā’ to the Banī Ḥushaysh tribal territory to meet with Manṣūr.\(^7\) “You’re really a Republican,” Lahlūm told Manṣūr. “The only reason you

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\(^3\) Dresch makes a similar point of this period, referencing the bombing of “royalist” tribes in Sanṭān in 1968, he writes: “Quite what the latter term meant by then is hard to be sure of.” Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen,* Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1993, 253.


\(^5\) The zāmil is quoted in Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen,* pg 264. The zāmil reads:

* Two after two they come leaping forward
* If they were struck still, so would the whole hive be.
* One’s son of Ŷahyā, one’s son of Husayn,
* Who grappled those horns and their lawless rule
* We mean the two mountain goats who in Ḥāshid are lords.
* If they leaped the mountain they’d leave it destroyed.


\(^7\) Abu Lahlūm, *al-Yaman,* 273.
Laḥum’s argument, which was coming in the immediate aftermath of the November 1967 coup that overthrew al-Sallāl, gets at one of the more overlooked parts of the civil war: personalities. Conflicts between individuals, whether al-Zubayrī and al-Sallāl, al-Iryānī and al-Sallāl or, even later, al-‘Amrī and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, often had far-reaching political consequences. Manṣūr didn’t yield initially, but within months, as the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes started leaving the country and Saudi money for Royalists started drying up, he defected and joined the side that was clearly going to win. In the months after the siege, when the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes were in full retreat – ‘Abdullāh was assassinated and Imām al-Badr had already left the country – the Royalists kept losing momentum and territory. One of the reasons that the Republican advances of 1968 and 1969 worked where earlier ones had failed is that this time the Republicans used local and regional tribes to do the fighting instead of foreign soldiers. Shaykh ‘Abdullāh and Abū Shawārib allied themselves with local tribes on the ground; they didn’t go in on their own. Because the battle lines had faded and tribes and fighters who had once been Royalists were now being integrated into the Republican side the war could find an end without the usual recriminations and score-settlings. The vast majority of Royalists simply became Republicans. Only the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, the imāms since Manṣūr and Yahyā, were declared persona non grata and had to leave the country. Everyone else simply did what Qāsim Manṣūr did and joined the winning side. But as we will see in chapter nine, this ease of ending, which allowed for civil war in the 1960s to end with a minimum of people being sent into exile also held within it the seeds of future conflicts. It was precisely this phenomenon of cross-conflict relationships, of Royalists becoming Republicans, that would eventually lead to the rise of the Ḥūthīs, another sayyid family determined to protect their religious and political heritage. The civil war of the 1960s had

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8 Abu Laḥum, al-Yaman, 273.
ended but the upheavals and issues it had brought into focus would still reverberate through Yemenis society decades later. This family of Zaydi sayyids, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, had come to feel that the bargain they had struck to join the republic after the civil war had been eroded to the point that they were in danger of political, cultural, and religious extinction. But in 1969 that was impossible to predict. The only thing that was clear was that the imāmate was finished. Yet, the fighting continued, sporadic and disjointed. In March 1969, Muḥammad Ḥusayn, who had recently been wounded, left for Saudi Arabia. The Royalists last major commander from the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, he would not return to Yemen. That same month, on March 18, Yemen’s first national council – what would later be called a “parliament” – was formed with 45 members in Ṣan‘ā’. Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-‘Armar was elected head of the national council. The war, as we have already seen, had changed the tribes and their relation to power. While they had always been important in fighting and supporting imāms before the war – the “wings of the imamate” – “they had not been represented in government as they were now.” Indeed, the list of names in the 45-member national council shows a heavy tribal influence. And under ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Iryānī, the head of Yemen’s presidential council and essentially the president, the “shaykhs were prominent.” Looking back on this period more than a dozen years later, one of Yemen’s most prominent critics and poets would refer to al-Iryānī’s rule and the rise of the shaykhs as “the second republic,” distinguishing it from the “first republic” under al-Sallāl. Al-‘Amri and al-‘Armar’s vision of a weak central state and powerful tribes was taking shape.

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11 For a list of all 45 members of the council see al-Farah, *Ṣīrat Muḥajid Abū Shawkār*, 120.
On March 18, 1969, the same day the national council was formed, Ḣayānī formed a three-man presidential council with Ḥasan al-‘Amrī and Muḥammad ‘Alī ‘Uṭmān.\(^{15}\) Al-‘Amrī was the prime minister and formed a government, but already the splits that in the Republican ranks had become obvious during the siege of Ṣanʿā’ were threatening the new government’s unity. There were still pockets of Royalist resistance in Ṣa‘dah and Najrān, but Saudi Arabia was starting to prepare for a post-imāmic Yemen on its southern border. Initially, as we have seen, it had supported the Royalists as a bulwark against Nasser’s incursions in the Arabian Peninsula. A lesser, although still very real, concern was the preservation of a monarchy-like regime in the imāmate, against whom the Saudis had fought a war in 1934. After the failure of the siege of Ṣanʿā’, as it became clear that neither Muḥammad al-Badr nor any of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes would be restored to power, the Saudis began slowly shifting their support by cultivating a growing list of tribal allies and gradually taking a more active hand in events in Ṣanʿā’ and the composition of local governments. This shift in Saudi policy in the months after the Siege of Ṣanʿā’ would set the course for its relationship with Yemen for years to come. A rapprochement between Riyadh and a Republican elite that was less hostile to Saudi Arabia was now possible. Saudi Arabia’s shift from supporting the imāmate to dealing with the Republic also illustrates how the kingdom is capable of handling geo-political changes. In other words, it does not simply give blind support to sectarian or even monarchical allies, two charges that are often leveled against the kingdom. For instance, in the Yemeni civil war, the Saudis backed the

\(^{15}\) Al-Farah, Ṣirāt Mujāhid Abū Shwārīb, 120.
Royalists even though the imāmāte was a Shi‘a institution. Political concerns more than ideological similarity determines for Saudi Arabia, as for many countries, its various policies.\textsuperscript{16}

Even as the Republicans were forming councils and governments in Ṣan‘ā’, the Royalists continued to hold onto Ṣa‘dah. Prince ‘Abdullāh bin Ḥasan, one of the last Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes still in Yemen, had formed a “government” inside the city, and maintained Royalist control over much of the region. On June 25, 1969, the Saḥār branch of the unaffiliated Khawlān bin ‘Āmīr tribe assassinated ‘Abdullāh.\textsuperscript{17} As often happens in such cases – and would happen again in 2014 and 2015 – the assassination sparked a blood feud that sent several Saḥār shaykhs fleeing for the protection of Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Āḥmar in Khamir. Along with reinforcements from Ṣan‘ā’ that included several members of the new parliament, and in coordination with al-Iryānī and al-‘Amrī in the capital, ‘Abdullāh and his tribal force moved north toward Ṣa‘dah. By early September, tribesmen carrying the Republican flag were able to march into the city of Ṣa‘dah unopposed.\textsuperscript{18} The Republicans were inching their way north. The siege of Ṣan‘ā’ had been lifted in February 1968, Ḥajjah was “liberated” in November 1968, and now Ṣa‘dah – near the Saudi border – was in Republican hands. The march north was never a coordinated military operation like the Egyptian offensives in 1963 and 1965. The Republican advance in 1968 and 1969 was slower and messier, but it was ultimately more successful. Tribes were no longer switching back-and-forth between Republicans and Royalists, now they were defecting from the Royalists and becoming Republican as in the case of Qāsim Manṣūr

\textsuperscript{16} This remains a common assumption about Saudis approach even today. See, for instance, the popular commentary surrounding Saudi’s execution of Nimr al-Nimr along with 46 other individuals in early 2016 and the subsequent breakdown in relations with Iran.

\textsuperscript{17} By unaffiliated here, I mean neither Ḥāshid nor Bakīl. For details of Abū Shawārīb’s advance north see al-Farah, \textit{Ṣīrat}, 122-125. For some reason, Dresch places ‘Abdullāh’s death in 1968; every other source places it in 1969.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 127.
By 1970 the civil war was over. As soon as the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes were removed from the equation the fighting fell off and a rough equilibrium was restored. This was less because the Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes were, as later Republican propaganda would put it, the source of evil. But rather because after so much fighting, someone had to bear responsibility. Much like the Republicans in late 1967, when they overthrew al-Sallāl, the country needed a scapegoat, and under the new republic it was the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. Everyone else, Royalist or Republican, could be rehabilitated and reintegrated back into the system. It is also noteworthy that with the abandonment of the sayyids as a ruling class, Yemenis from all segments of society were now, at least nominally, in control of the country and no one person or group could stand above the socio-political fray to act as a neutral arbiter. Historically, going back to the invitation of Imām al-Hādī into Yemen in the late ninth century, this meant disorder in the absence of an arbiter. The overthrow of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty effectively ended that model of political rule which had, to various degrees of success, provided a modicum of stability. Since 1962 and continuing until today, Yemen has not been able to effectively develop an alternative political model that allows for neutral mediation.

**Zaydī Sayyids in the Republic**

As the fighting fell off and the civil war limped to a close, life continued largely as before for the Zaydīs in and around Ṣa‘dah. The imamate was gone and the Ḥamīd al-Dīns were in exile, but what this meant for the daily rhythms of life wasn’t immediately clear. The rest of the Zaydī elite, the *sayyids*, remained and the Republican government in Ṣan‘ā’ was far away. Besides, what a Republican government meant in early 1970 wasn’t exactly clear either. Yemen’s first two attempts to move away from the imāmate – the 1948 coup and the 1962 revolution – had each failed. The 1948 coup, which attempted a compromise solution, a middle-
ground constitutional monarchy, had been put down brutally by Imam Aḥmad. The 1962 attempt at establishing an Egyptian-like republican regime had floundered as well. Yemen’s rugged geography alone made attempting to replicate a strong central state with the capital as a hub impossible. After years of Egyptian haughtiness, Nasser’s defeat in 1967, and the slow moving coup that overthrew al-Sallāl, the idea of continuing to imitate the Egyptian model was as distasteful as it was unworkable. This meant that in 1970, eight years after the revolution and the fall of the imamate, Yemen still didn’t know what it was. It was a republic founded in opposition – opposition to the imamate and opposition to the Egyptian model. But each of those opponents was now gone, and it was time for Yemen to figure out the type of republic it would be.

It was state-building by revolutionaries and tribesmen. There was no clear blueprint to follow, and as a result the dozens of men tasked with deciding the direction of the state experimented and adjusted as they tried to find something that would work in theory and in practice. The revolving door in Ṣa‘dah illustrates this trial-and-error process. Mujāhid Abū Shawārīb had been instrumental in taking the city and the area around it, but in Ṣan‘ā’ al-‘Arī decided against letting the tribal shaykh maintain control in the name of the republic. Instead, al-‘Arī dispatched the army officer Yaḥyā al-Mutawakkil to take command. Al-Mutawakkil lasted barely two weeks before resigning the post. Next al-‘Arī appointed Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Kuhālī, another military officer, who lasted less than a week himself before he was wounded and replaced by yet another officer. Yemen was a country in search of a state. On February 5, 1970, Muḥsin al-‘Aynī formed a new government, and in March Saudi Arabia reached out to

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19 al-Farah, sīrat, 137. The fact that the military commander was shot in early 1970 gives some indication that although the war was over, Ṣa‘dah was not yet completely pacified. Abū Shawārīb, who must have been frustrated at not being immediately awarded the post, left for Cairo and “medical treatment” – a common excuse then as it has been more recently for prominent Yemenis to leave the country and a government they were in conflict with.
Yemen with an olive branch. The Kingdom was hosting a meeting of foreign ministers from Islamic states, and asked Yemen to attend. That same year, 1970, Saudi Arabia recognized the republic. Nasserism, as a political movement, was spent and the war was over. Saudi Arabia could relax. The kingdom had agreed to provide exile for the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family and, as part of a reconciliation process that saw several “royalists” like Aḥmad al-Shāmī incorporated into the new republic it also provided the government in Ṣanʿā’ with a grant of $20 million. This was not a purely altruistic move by the Saudis. Instead, Saudi Arabia recognized that it could rent influence in Yemen, using its cash reserves as leverage. For a cash rich but militarily weak kingdom this proved to be both easier and less costly than military incursions. Indeed, as some have noted, Saudi’s policy of providing subsidies to the tribes in the 1960s led nearly seamlessly to a policy of payment, which continues to this day, allowing for a “permanent influence on the internal affairs of the country.”

Saudi Arabia had no desire to relive the 1960s and the fear-filled years of worrying about a hostile power on its southern border. By diversifying and cultivating a variety of different, and often opposing, allies with its excess oil wealth seemed a much safer course than backing a single foreign friend. This strategy went well with the oft-cited – though perhaps apocryphal – advice King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz is said to have given his sons and successors: “Keep Yemen weak, but not too weak.” That sentence, apocryphal or not, neatly sums up Saudi Arabia’s approach to its southern neighbor over the next 40 years.

Even without Saudi meddling – which was often referred to politely as “the influence of a foreign country” – Yemen would have had a difficult time constructing a cohesive state. 

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20 Paul Dresch, *Modern Yemen*, 124. Of course, as we have seen throughout this study, what exactly was meant by the term “royalist” (*malakīyyun*) was often unclear. Although many tribes and figures shifted back-and-forth between the two sides, there were some that remained staunchly “royalist” throughout the war. But none, save the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, was too “royalist” as to be beyond the pale for the new republic.


22 Quote in Dresch, *Yemen*, 124.
Iryānī had been a compromise candidate, in Dresch’s pithy phrasing, “a republican but scarcely a radical.” Like many of the Republicans, al-Iryānī had spent years in prison under Yahyā and Aḥmad, and was even scheduled to be executed twice. The second time, in 1955, Aḥmad called a halt just as the executioner raised his sword above al-Iryānī’s head. The man who avoided the imām’s executioner that day would go on to become the republic’s second president. Born in 1908 in the village of Iryān in what is often considered the border zone between north and south Yemen, on the edge of the Zaydī highlands and Shafi‘ī lowlands, al-Iryānī was the right man for a country looking for an identity.

Neither from the north or south, not Zaydī or Shāfi‘ī, at least in the political rhetoric of the moment, al-Iryānī was cautious and as his obituary in the New York Times later put it, “the only civilian to have led northern Yemen.” His government, particularly from 1969-70 on, was a bridge between the war years of the 1960s and the Republican years of the 1970s. It was “a stoutly republican coalition that retained none the less a great deal of the administrative style of the old regime.”

In many ways, of course, this made sense, al-Iryānī and his initial colleagues on the presidential council – Muḥammad ‘Alī ‘Uthman and Aḥmad Nu‘mān – were, for all their opposition to the imamate, shaped by it. Government in Yemen had been the imāms, and as the Republic moved away from the strong Egyptian influence of an “adviser” at the top of every minister, it fell back on what it knew. The late 1960s, after the failure of the Siege of Ṣan‘ā’ and the early 1970s, were a transition period. Yemen moved from an imāmate without imāms to something altogether different. For much of that period, al-Iryānī’s influence was limited and

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23 Dresch, Yemen, 124.
24 In 2008, a decade after al-Iryānī’s death in 1998 an Israeli journalist suggested – on the basis of little evidence - that al-Iryānī was actually born Zekharia Haddad a Yemeni Jew who was later adopted by the al-Iryanī family. That story has been refuted by media outlets in Yemen.
26 Dresch, Tribes and Government, 362.
27 Nu‘mān, of course, resigned from the council shortly after being named to it.
checked by the powerful military commander Ḥasan al-‘Amrī, who as we have seen was the republic’s “Napoleon” during the siege. Unlike al-Sallāl, al-Iryānī was a judge not a soldier. He negotiated and compromised more than he ordered, which gave al-‘Amrī a stronger hand in the aftermath of the siege. It was al-‘Amrī, not al-Iryānī the president, who initially refused to allow Mujāhid Abū Shawārib to remain in Ṣaʿdah after the city fell in 1969. But in September 1971 al-‘Amrī went too far and was forced to resign after he killed a civilian in Ṣan‘ā’. Like so many Yemeni politicians, al-‘Amrī went into exile in Beirut before moving to Cairo. Four years after the coup that overthrew al-Sallāl, al-Iryānī was finally in charge. Initially, the council of ‘Uthman and Nu‘mān had prevented al-Iryānī from acting as a true head of state. Almost as soon as Nu‘mān resigned the siege started and al-‘Amrī took center stage. Now, those men were gone and it was al-Iryānī’s turn. He would do little better.

The nearly three years from al-‘Amrī’s resignation in late 1971 until the coup that removed al-Iryānī from power in July 1974 were marked by disorder and confusion. Muḥammad ‘Ali ‘Uthman, the third member of al-Iryānī’s council, was murdered in Ta‘izz in early 1973, prime ministers rotated in and out of office at a rapid clip, and “execution and widespread arrests were carried out against al-Iryānī’s wishes.” There were elections and councils – Republican councils, consultative councils, and a number of others with elected and appointed bodies – but none of it really seemed to matter. Yemen was a paper state, appointments were made and individuals took up new positions but nothing seemed to change. Al-Iryānī was a judge trying to head a state. He was leading, but no one seemed to be following.

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28 Dresch, Modern History, 115.
29 al-Farah, Sīrat, 136-137.
30 Dresch, Modern History, 124.
31 Al-Farah, Sīrat, 151.
32 Dresch, Modern History, 126.
By late 1973 and early 1974 it was clear a break was coming. Just like in the civil war, the Republicans were once again breaking into factions. Muḥammad al-Faraḥ in his biography of Mujāhid Abū Shawārib presents three groups: al-Iryānī and his supporters, Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar and Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī, with Sinān Abū Lahūm falling somewhere in between the latter two. As rough as al-Faraḥ’s breakdown is, it is fairly accurate. Aḥmad Nu’mān backed al-Iryānī, while other Republican heroes like Abū Shawārib went with Ḥāshid and al-Aḥmar; everyone had a side. Al-Aḥmar was the strongest player, but he was outside the military and head of the Ḥāshid tribal confederation. But it is still important to note that in 1973 and 1974, in the absence of the imāms, the tribes had moved to center stage and controlled more political power than they ever had under the imāmate. As the most politically powerful tribesmen, al-Aḥmar was also the strongest player. He didn’t want the presidency, but his support was essential.33 Al-Aḥmar backed Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī, a military officer, who was then deputy prime minister. The “corrective movement” (al-ḥarakah al-taṣḥiḥiyyah) of July 1974 was the result. Just like al-Sallāl in 1967, al-Iryānī was out, overthrown in another bloodless coup.

Like al-Iryānī and, indeed, much of Yemen, al-Ḥamdī was a mix of Zaydī and Shāfi‘ī.34 On his father’s side he came from a family of Zaydī qāḍīs, while his mother was a Shāfi‘ī. But what mattered, at least for al-Ḥamdī, was his connection to the exiled Ḥasan al-‘Amrī. It was al-Ḥamdī’s connection to and relationship with al-‘Amrī that put him in a position to rise to power as part of the June 1974 “corrective movement.” Like al-Iryānī, al-Ḥamdī wasn’t simply

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33 There is, of course, an interesting parallel here to al-Aḥmar’s grandfather’s support for Yaḥyā in 1904, which we discussed in chapter one.
34 This shared background gives a sense of how little – outside of the sayyid classes – sectarian identity mattered as a marriage marker. Obviously, there were, and are, doctrinal differences between Zaydī and Shāfi‘ī schools, but the sectarian conflict and what I would call the radicalization of the religious landscape was not as obvious or apparent in the 1970s as it is today. Republicans and Royalists were Zaydīs, although admittedly not many Royalists were Shāfi‘īs. The point here is that there was a blending and a mixing of the two groups that appears to be hardening today.
declared president, rather he was made the head of a seven-person council. The effect, however, was the same – al-Ḥamdī was in charge – but the form was important. Following the highly personalized rule of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn imāms, particularly Yaḥyā and Aḥmad, the new republicans were suspicious of what was often termed ḥukm fardī, individualized, often authoritarian, rule. The various presidential and leadership councils were designed to prevent a relapse into ḥukm fardī. That they didn’t is more a function of personal ambition and power politics within Ṣanʿā’ than anything else. The intention was to decouple the state from a single individual – be that an imām or a president.

Al-Ḥamdī’s presidency marks what al-Barradūnī would later call the “third republic,” the rise of the “colonel-shaykhs.” As Dresch points out in multiple works, the traditional dichotomy of tribes v. the army – just like the old one of Republicans v. Royalists – does not hold on closer examination. Al-Ḥamdī himself was tribal and yet a military officer as was Aḥmad al-Ghashmī, whose brother was the shaykh of Hamdān Ṣanʿā’. Each, the tribe and the military, was a path to power. Some like Aḥmad al-Ghashmī chose one, while his brother chose the other. Five days after the coup, on June 18, 1974, Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar convened a tribal gathering to express support for the Corrective Movement and al-Ḥamdī’s leadership. But within months cracks were already starting to develop in the new alliance. In January 1975, al-Ḥamdī and Muḥsin al-‘Aynī squabbled, which led to al-‘Aynī’s removal as prime minister. This, in retrospect, was the beginning of al-Ḥamdī’s ḥukm fardī. He styled himself a little

35 The make up of the council was: al-Ḥamdī, Muḥsin al-‘Aynī, Mūjāhid Abū Shawārīb, Dirham Abū Lahūm, Aḥmad al-Ghashmī, Yahya al-Mutawakkil, and ‘Abdullāh ‘Abd al-‘Ālim. See, for instance, al-Farah, Sirat, 164.
36 Dresch, Modern History, 130.
37 Dresch, Tribes and Government, 362 – 364. Dresch’s discussion here is quite good and, as he says the two sets of people (shaykhs and colonels) often came from the same families.
38 Ibid, 362.
40 Al-Farah, Sirat, 167. al-Farah is generally good – although cautious – in his details here, going into much more detail on the back-and-forth in 1975 that led to the split between al-Ḥamdī and so many of the tribal shaykhs who had initially supported him.
Nasser, setting aside his military uniform in favor of a short-sleeved safari suit. Al-Ḥamdī was a populist who was genuinely popular, traveling around the country and, in a departure from the imāms, meeting with normal people. And it may have been this sense of popularity that led al-Ḥamdī to further consolidate power and oust many of those who had helped him get to the top.

In addition to dismissing al-‘Aynī as prime minister, he also sent the Abū Laḥūms packing. One of al-Ḥamdī’s most interesting moves was his championing of local councils, which many saw as a model of civil society that presented a real alternative to tribes as a power bloc for political action. Indeed, many of the traditional elites saw these councils (ta‘wuniyyāt) as a threat to themselves and their positions. Al-Ḥamdī’s close association with the councils and its perceived threat to tribal elites was only exacerbated in June 1975 when he fired Abū Shawārib from his position on the council and as governor in Ḥajjah while the latter was on a trip to China. But the decisive break came a few months later, in October 1975, when al-Ḥamdī suspended the assembly, which was headed by Shaykh ‘Abdullah al-Ḥmar. The suspension effectively put al-Ḥmar in the same position as the Abū Laḥūms and Abū Shawārib: outside of government. For the three powerful tribal families, all of whom had been staunch Republicans, this raised an interesting question: what did it mean to be a shaykh in the new republic? Under the imāms Ḥāshid and Bakīl had famously been labelled “the two wings of the imamate.” But now what were they? If a president could dismiss them so easily what really was their role?

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43 Dresch, *Modern History*, 130. al-Faraḥ is, as one would suspect, more circumspect in the details of the dismissal. See, *Sirah*, 167-168.
What did it mean to be tribes in the republic? Had they rid themselves of the imām and his personalized system of rule only to be at the whim of a president of a republic?

As was typical, Shaykh ʿAbdullāh called another conference to address the issue. But unlike the ones during the war years, this one brought about concrete change. What emerged was essentially a break with al-Ḥamdī. Broadly speaking, the tribes of Ḥāshid, who had considered themselves either part of, or supportive of, the Corrective Movement, now went their own way, refusing government soldiers access to their territory. Al-Ḥamdī controlled the government and ruled the cities, while his old allies drew “what was in effect a border between the government and those tribes whose leaders had before been most closely involved with Ṣanʿā’.”

Much of this, it goes without saying in many of the sources, was only possible because of the Saudi stipends that were flowing to these same shaykhly families.

At the same time he had alienated many of his domestic allies, who had backed his rise to power, al-Ḥamdī was also clashing with Saudi Arabia, a division that grew as al-Ḥamdī worked to unite north and south Yemen as a single country. Although the desire for unification existed on both sides of the border, the planning for such was often short on practical details. Saudi Arabia was opposed to unity and a potentially strong Yemen on its southern border with Socialists in positions of influence. The civil war had shown Saudi Arabia exactly how threatening Yemen could be, and the kingdom wanted to make sure it was never threatened in the same way again. In the 1960s it was Nasser who was looking to establish a foothold in Yemen; in the future it could be anyone, even the Soviets who already had a base of operations in the South. The important thing was to make sure that Yemen would never again act as a

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44 Of course, as we have seen and pointed out previously, al-Ḥamdī wasn’t anti-tribal. He brought in certain members of Bakīl. This, obviously, was of little consolation to those who had just lost their positions.
threshold into the Arabian Peninsula for an outside power. Keeping the country divided and weak was part of Saudi Arabia’s strategy to make sure this didn’t happen.

Al-Ḥamdī was scheduled to travel to Aden on October 12, 1977 to discuss unity with his southern counterpart. But the day before his trip, on October 11, Ibrahīm al-Ḥamdī and his brother, ‘Abdullāh, were assassinated. Their bodies were doused with alcohol and dumped with a pair of foreign women, later said to be prostitutes, as a way of showing just how far from Islam the pair had strayed.\textsuperscript{46} Despite, or maybe because of, his quick and gruesome end al-Ḥamdī has become a near mythical creature in Yemen, not unlike the cult of John F. Kennedy in the United States. Like Kennedy, al-Ḥamdī is remembered as a modernizer, a brilliant young man who was cut down by his enemies before he could implement his great vision for society. Indeed, decades later, in the early 2000s it was not uncommon to hear Yemenis bemoaning al-Ḥamdī’s absence, claiming Yemen would have been much different – which meant less “backwards” and corrupt – had he survived. When Ṣāliḥ was forced to step down in the face of popular protests in 2011 and 2012, many Yemenis suggested that what the country needed was another “al-Ḥamdī.”\textsuperscript{47} But like Kennedy, this trades fact for retrospective fiction. Al-Ḥamdī’s three years in power coincided--due to the post-1973 oil price rises--with a period of increased remittances from Yemenis working abroad in the Gulf as guest workers, as well as a time for plentiful rains at home for local crops. Still, just as it is doubtful that Kennedy could have kept the US out of Vietnam, so too is it unlikely that al-Ḥamdī would have been the modernizer many of his contemporary admirers imagine him to be. Instead, Aḥmad al-Ghashmī, the tank commander

\textsuperscript{46} The crime has never been solved, although many including ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ and the Saudis are said to have had a hand in al-Ḥamdī’s death and both certainly benefited from his removal. But that is a bit of post hoc, ergo propter hoc argument and therefore speculative. Another version of the story claims that the women were French nurses. But by this point the story has been so clouded with myth and conflicting versions that the truth will likely never be known.

\textsuperscript{47} Author’s observations and discussions with Yemenis of a variety of social and economic backgrounds in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, and 2012.
who had been part of al-Ḥamdī’s original seven-man council, took over as president. He lasted only a few months before he too was assassinated, this time with an exploding briefcase bomb.\(^{48}\) In just over a decade, Yemen had seen its first two presidents overthrown in coups and its next two assassinated.\(^{49}\)

On July 17, 1978, ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Śāliḥ, a military officer, took command of the state as the republic’s fifth president. Śāliḥ came from Sanḥān outside of Ṣan‘ā’. Early in his life he had been a foot soldier in the imām’s army before joining the Republican forces shortly after the coup. He fought in the siege of Ṣan‘ā’ and was close to both al-Ḥamdī and al-Ghashmī. In 1975, when al-Ḥamdī was distancing himself from many of the shaykhs he had once relied on, he removed Dirham Abū Laḥūm as commander of the garrison in Ta’izz and replaced him with ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Śāliḥ, a self-made soldier who didn’t present the same threat to power as a colonel-shaykh. Coming to power on the heels of a pair of brutal assassinations, Śāliḥ moved quickly to ensure his security. The new president trusted only those he knew, and that meant his clan and tribe. Śāliḥ had grown up with his stepfather and uncle, Śāliḥ, who was the full brother of his deceased father.\(^{50}\) Śāliḥ trusted him and his stepbrothers and cousins, particularly ‘Alī Śāliḥ and Muḥammad Śāliḥ. His full brother, Muḥammad ‘Abdullāh Śāliḥ, who had also been raised by their uncle and stepfather was quickly named head of Central Security, and several other members of the Bayt al-Aḥmar clan of Sanḥān soon acquired prominent military posts.

Instead of pursuing a broad tent approach to ruling, bringing in various clans and tribes as a way of ensuring their support, Śāliḥ opted for family rule. That choice probably saved his life.

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\(^{48}\) Unlike al-Ḥamdī’s assassination, al-Ghashmī’s was easily solved. He was killed by a southern faction, who used the qat-for-money arrangement that al-Ghashmī had with the southern president as cover to kill the northern president and then his southern counterpart. It was convoluted, messy and emblematic of Yemeni politics in the 1970s.

\(^{49}\) J.E. Peterson, *Conflict in the Yemens and Superpower Involvement*, Washington DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies Georgetown University Occasional Paper Series, 1981. Peterson does a good job of looking at the events in Yemen around the time of al-Ghashmī’s death.

\(^{50}\) Dresch, *Modern History*, 149.
Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, Ṣāliḥ survived a handful of assassination attempts. And slowly, as he gained control of the state apparatus, Ṣāliḥ started to branch out, relying on families his clan had married into, primarily Bayt Ismā‘īl and Bayt al-Qadī, and then, later, marrying his sons and daughters, nieces and nephews into various elite families throughout the country. Ṣāliḥ himself married into some of these families, the traditional power brokers in Yemen, and that approach to politics through marriage – whether by design or not – meant that when it was finally time for Ṣāliḥ to depart in 2011 and 2012 he was so integrated into the system in Yemen that he couldn’t be removed. He had been weaving his family into the fabric of Yemen’s most powerful families for more than 30 years, and it was impossible to pull those threads out without destroying everything else. Unlike the Hamīd al-Dīn imāms who could be isolated and forced out and then scapegoated, Ṣāliḥ was more resilient. Yemen’s elite, the country’s most powerful families, couldn’t rid the country of him because, over the course of his 33 years in power, they had become implicated in his rule.

But it was another of al-Ḥamdī’s decisions that would have long-term implications for the state and the future of Zaydī religiosity in the Yemeni highlands. In much the same way that al-Ḥamdī gave Ṣāliḥ a boost on the road to power, so too did he help along ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Zindānī by naming him Yemen’s murshid, or religious guide. Al-Zindānī, who as a young man had been part of al-Zubayrī’s Hizb Allah party, even traveling with al-Zubayrī when the former was assassinated, had spent time in Saudi Arabia after the death of his mentor. He used his new position to funnel Saudi money into the country to fund religious institutes, many of which fostered a Salafised form of Sunnism. As Haykel points out, these institutes were a way of

51 A good study of this is Sarah Phillips, Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011.
“inculcating a monolithic Sunni version of Islam among Yemen’s youth.” Dresch writes that the function of these institutes was to “block the socialists,” and this was certainly part of their writ, but they also succeeded in rolling back revivalist Zaydis. Al-Zindānī favored a Muslim Brotherhood type of Islam – indeed *murshid* is a Muslim Brotherhood term – which viewed Zaydis through a sectarian lens, and the institutes he channeled money to tended to reflect this outlook as well.

**Salafi Incursions into Ṣa‘dah**

For the Zaydī traditionalists in Ṣa‘dah it was not Saudi money that presented the initial challenge. They were still getting their own paychecks and subsidies as Saudi Arabia hedged its bets in Yemen. Rather it was a Saudi castoff, exiled by the kingdom in 1979 in the wake of the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, who presented the most direct challenge to Zaydism in the northern Yemeni highlands. What made it worse and even more threatening was that this castoff had once been one of their own, a Zaydī tribesman from Ṣa‘dah. Muqbil bin Hādī al-Wādī‘ī, known as a shaykh to his followers, was born in the tiny village of Dammāj, east of the city of Ṣa‘dah. It was not a happy childhood. His father died before he was five and his mother followed shortly after. Both of his sisters passed away when he was a young man and his younger brother, Ali, was killed during the civil war of the 1960s. The loss of his parents and the sense of abandonment he must have felt were worsened by the taunts and abuse he suffered as a child.

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53 Al-Zindānī is a controversial figure in Yemen, who for many years headed his own Islamic university. He was, for a while in the years after unification, on the presidential council and is a popular preacher. Al-Zindānī is also involved in the movement to reconcile the Qur’ān and modern science. See, for instance, *Human Development as Described in the Qur’an and Sunnah: Correlation with Modern Embryology*, eds. Zindani, Ahmed, Tobin, and Persaud, Alexandria, VA: Islamic Academy for Scientific Research, 1994, to which al-Zindānī contributed. He has also written several other books such as *The Path of Faith*, (no trans.) Riyadh: International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, 1994, as well as numerous others.

child at the hands of local children and more than a few adults. He was constantly picked on and nicknamed the “emaciated one” for his undersized frame and weak body.\(^{55}\) Another biography, perhaps in an effort to demonstrate that al-Wādiʿī always possessed a kernel of piety, relates an anecdote about him refusing to approach a group of young men and women who were dancing together under a tree in celebration of a local holiday. “The shaykh,” it says, “saw them from a distance and escaped from them.”\(^{56}\) The implication is that even at a young age, al-Wādiʿī knew that unmarried men and women should not mix, but it is just as likely that the shy and abused young man was worried about how he would be treated. As a child, al-Wādiʿī found his place in the world of books, studying first at the village school and then moving to a more advanced school at the Imām al-Hadī Mosque in Ṣaʿdah. But here, too, he ran into problems. Instead of the tribal children who made fun of him for being weak, now it was the Zaydī sayyids who mocked his tribal origins as unbecoming of a scholar. He lacked the family support to fully fit in as a tribesman and the religious pedigree to be a scholar. All of this, it seems, led to a disillusionment with his Zaydī heritage. Al-Wādiʿī eventually left the school and worked a series of low-paying jobs before finally leaving for Saudi Arabia in what even then, in the years before the civil war, was starting to become a rite of passage for young men in northern Yemen.

In Saudi Arabia, al-Wādiʿī found what he had been missing in Yemen. He listened to Wahhabi preachers expound on the Qurʾan and hadith, opening up for him the intellectual environment he had always craved but could never access. Wahhabism, at least from the mouths of the popular preachers he heard, stressed the equality of all Muslims, so different from the rigid social order and hierarchy back home, where scholarship and religious learning were the closely guarded territory of the sayyids. Just as importantly, al-Wādiʿī was accepted into this world. He

\(^{55}\) Al-ʿUdaynī, al-Wādiʿī.
was only a migrant worker, holding down menial jobs like that of a doorman and guard, but the preachers and scholars in Saudi Arabia still took the time to answer his questions and recommend books he should be reading. He knew what the problem was: Zaydism and the stranglehold that the sayyids had on religious learning. But the world he came back to was the same one he left: tribal and dominated by Zaydi sayyids. Now, he was challenging the very foundations of a society. He quickly learned, as one biographer put it, to keep his true beliefs in his heart.57

Although he would marry four different women over the course of his life, al-Wādi‘ī produced only daughters. He had no sons and therefore no successors in accordance with the patriarchal system of Yemen.58 This would become important later in his life, as we shall soon see, when the movement he founded effectively split into two separate groups each following one of al-Wādi‘ī’s lieutenants.

Throughout the 1970s, as Yemen struggled to find what a republic meant, al-Wādi‘ī traveled back and forth between the two countries. But at some point in the mid-1970s, al-Wādi‘ī crossed a line and was thrown in jail in Yemen. In his supervised biography he doesn’t spend much time on the incident, saying only that it was part of a “communist and Shi‘a” plot, but it appears to have rattled him.59 He fled the country shortly after being released, again retreating to the relative safety of the Wahhabi kingdom. But Saudi Arabia was also changing and dealing with its own version of religious undesirables. Just like back home, al-Wādi‘ī found

58 In many ways this mirrors other prominent Yemenis such as Sadiq al-A‘mar, the son and successor of Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-A‘mar as paramount shaykh of the Ḥāshid tribal confederation, who never produced a male heir. This will be dealt with more fully in the conclusion and, while there are many other reasons for the decline of bayt al-A‘mar, Sadiq’s poor leadership and lack of a direct male heir should not be overlooked as inconsequential.
59 al-Wādi‘ī, Sīrat, 19.
himself on the wrong side of an internal political dispute and imprisoned. In 1979, he was arrested in a security sweep in the aftermath of the takeover of the Great Mosque in Mecca, when Juhayman al-‘Utaybī and several hundred followers seized and held the holiest site in Islam for three weeks.\textsuperscript{60} The rebellion rocked the kingdom, which was unable to retake the mosque on its own, and was instead forced to rely on foreign troops. Exposed and humiliated, the Saudis cracked down hard, arresting thousands of young men, including al-Wādi‘ī. He was held for several months before being deported back to Yemen.

The expulsion stung al-Wādi‘ī, who insisted he had never supported al-‘Utaybī or the takeover. For much of the rest of his life he refused even to acknowledge Saudi Arabia by name, insisting on referring to it only as “the land of the two holy places and the Najd.” Harassed and arrested in Yemen and expelled from Saudi Arabia, the nearly fifty-year-old al-Wādi‘ī made a decision: he would build a Salafi center in his hometown. The institute, \textit{Madrasāt Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Khayriyya}, was initially more dream than reality.\textsuperscript{61} Its grandiose title dwarfed everything else about the place: a mosque of dirt and, as one biographer would later write, fewer students than fingers on a person’s hands.\textsuperscript{62}

Chronically short of money and followers, al-Wādi‘ī struggled through the early years of the center, bouncing from crisis to crisis, paying for gas with spare bullets and subsisting on tribal handouts.\textsuperscript{63} But he was deliberately provocative, railing against what he termed the Zaydī evils of visiting graves and the special status of the \textit{sayyids}. Still, over time, al-Wādi‘ī began to build a following, playing on the tribal shaykhs’ traditional animosity towards the \textit{sayyids} – the


\textsuperscript{61} Theo Padnos, \textit{Undercover Muslim: A Journey Into Yemen}, London: The Bodley Head, 2011, is an account of an American, who pretends to convert to Islam, studying in Dammaj.


\textsuperscript{63} Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Wādi‘ī, \textit{al-Riḥlāt}, 22.
two groups often saw each other as competitors for power – and on young men frustrated with a social hierarchy that kept them from marrying up into the sayyid class. Al-Wādi‘ī’s message of equality was perfectly pitched to appeal to young tribesmen who were eager for personal advancement and societal change. In the post-war power play between the shaykhs and sayyids, al-Wādi‘ī started to make in-roads and gain a following. Republican Islam, at least in Yemen, came to mean a post-madhab Sunnism, and al-Wādi‘ī fit right in where Zaydīs no longer did. And for this, if for no other reason, al-Wādi‘ī was tolerated and even used by both the Saudi government in Riyadh and his own government in Ṣan‘ā’. He became throughout the 1980s and 1990s a sort of beachhead against Zaydism, which both governments were trying to neuter if not eliminate.

From Ṣan‘ā’ it was easy to ignore al-Wādi‘ī’s writings as the ravings of a cranky old man, someone who was only happy when he was angry. Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Ālmar, the Ḥāshid tribal leader, once dismissed him, saying of his group: “They have a guide in Ṣa’dah called Muqbil al-Wādi‘ī. What he does is declare people infidels and write books against everyone else.” But in Ṣa’dah, it was impossible to ignore al-Wādi‘ī so easily. There at the murky junction of tribal politics and religion he was seen only through the prism of his opposition to Zaydism. His animosity towards other, more distant groups was ignored as

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64 On the politics of marriage in Yemen see vom Bruck, Islam, Memory and Morality, 131 – 146.
67 In the section of one of his biographies entitled “From the Golden Words of Our Shaykh,” one finds: “Party politics are a greater disease than AIDS.” But this studied stance against Islamist activism was in its own way a form of partisanship. Al-Wādi‘ī had no shortage of enemies. Where he differed, he criticized, attacking everyone from Osama bin Laden and the Muslim Brotherhood to Jamā’at al-Tablīgh. His most famous book, Khurūj min al-fitna, or The Exit from Disorder, is little more than a compilation of criticisms of other, supposedly Muslim groups. The Zaydīs, it turns out, were not his only primary opponents and his vision of a Salafized Yemen meant he had to engage polemically and vilify a range of other social and religious actors.
68 Quoted in Dresch, History of Modern Yemen, 200.
irrelevant. All that mattered was his local stance and, on that, he agreed with Shaykh ʿAbdullāh al-Aḥmar, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Zindānī and President Ṣāliḥ. In the eyes of the Zaydis, al-Wāḍīʾī was part of a two-pronged alliance of Salafis and other Sunnis working to eradicate their heritage and traditions.

**Zaydī Pushback**

Al-Wāḍīʾī’s primary enemy was the Zaydī sayyids in and around Ṣaʿdah. The sayyids, in the 1970s and 1980s, were a group in disorder. They were trying to situate themselves in a new republic that seemed to be doing little to counter the proselytizing push from Saudi Arabia while at the same time remaining true to their beliefs and their heritage. One of the Zaydī scholars who attempted to make sure that the new generation held to the old ways even in the absence of an imām was a brusque, undersized man named Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī. An ascetic with a great deal of personal piety, he had a legendary daily regimen of study and prayer. One biography, written by a follower, describes his daily routine. “He wakes two hours before the dawn prayer,” it says, stressing that he refuses to speak to anyone for the first several hours of the day. Around ten in the morning he goes for a long walk before devoting the rest of the day to study.

Born on November 23, 1926 – 36 generations removed from the Prophet Muḥammad – Badr al-Dīn was trained by his father and grandfather, Amīr al-Dīn and Ḥusayn, respectively. The family name comes from the village of al-Ḥūth, a once-prominent education center on the main road between Ṣanʿāʾ and Ṣaʿdah. But by the time Badr al-Dīn was born the family had

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69 In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s audiocassettes played a major role in Yemeni political and religious life, not to mention cultural life, where audio recordings of poems and songs made the rounds at qat chews, and cassettes sellers did a thriving business. For a study of this latter phenomenon see Flagg Miller, *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media: Audiocassettes, Poetry and Culture in Yemen*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007.


71 The biography, which is in my possession, does not list an author. I received the biography in response to a request I sent to the editors of al-Minbar, the Ḥūthī website. A similar biography to the one I possess is readily available in Arabic on the internet.
already moved further north, closer to Ṣa‘dah. One biography lists him as the author of more than twenty books. He also seems to have been ahead of the curve in recognizing the threat that proselytizing missionaries from Saudi Arabia held for the Zaydi community in Yemen. In 1979 he wrote a book-length rebuttal to a fatwa by Saudi Arabia’s chief cleric, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Bāz, which forbade Muslims from praying behind a Zaydi. The war of words between the two escalated to the point that Bin Bāz – at least according to Zaydi supporters – is alleged to have put out a hit on Badr al-Dīn. The team of assassins, however, missed their target, shelling Badr al-Dīn’s sitting room with rockets just before the evening prayer. Badr al-Dīn’s lifelong habit of arriving early for prayers and taking his time with the ritual ablution saved his life.72

In the 1980s, North Yemen was state run by Zaydis, without being a Zaydi state.73 Šāliḥ was a Zaydi, as was al-Aḥmar and most of the other prominent figures in government. But this identity as talked about by outsiders elides something important that was happening on the ground. For Šāliḥ and al-Aḥmar never used their Zaydi identity or the sect’s teachings as a basis for rule. Šāliḥ came to power through the military, and he used that and a network of family and tribe as the foundation for his presidency; al-Aḥmar was a tribal figure, a shaykh, whose power was based on his tribe and the confederation of tribes he led. Neither looked to Zaydi theology to justify their rule. Neither was eligible to be an imām. To outsiders, even outsiders in Yemen like the Shāfi‘is, the state might look like a Zaydi one, but to the sayyids in Ṣa‘dah, who had supplied the imāms, the state was made up of Sunnified and lapsed Zaydis and certainly was not anything like a Zaydi state they recognized. The Zaydi traditionalists – who would soon come to be called “revivalists” – had just as much of a problem with the configuration of the central state as did other outsiders.

72 Ibid.
73 Quoted in Dresch, Modern History, 164.
In 1987 a number of Zaydī students formed the Union of Believing Youth (Shabāb al-Muʾminīn), a cultural and religious grouping, which never quite got off the ground. Three years later, convinced their original idea was still solid, the students organized a similar group, this time calling it the Club of Believing Youth, or Shabab al-Muʾminīn. The club started out small, as a summer center near where Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūṭḥī was born in the region of Ḍāḥyān. The two main forces behind the revamped club were Muḥammad ‘Īzzān, a student of Badr al-Dīn’s and Muḥammad al-Ḥūṭḥī, one of his sons. Locked in an increasingly violent struggle with the Salafis for the future of their community, they were dealt another blow with the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. Unification drastically reshaped the political landscape of the country, ushering in an era of party politics that had largely been absent during the 1970s and 1980s. Instead of remaining a dominant power like they had been in the north, the Zaydīs suddenly found themselves a demographic minority in the new Sunni dominated state. The answer they settled on was a decidedly modern one, more rooted in contemporary political theory than their own traditions. Like nearly every other group in Yemen at the time, they established a political party, Hizb al-Ḥaqq, or the Party of Truth, in late 1990. The defenders of Zaydī heritage were just one more party in a sea of competing ideologies, mixed in with Communists, Baʿathists, Nasserists and anyone else with letterhead and a fax machine.

It was a study in contradiction: How to fit a religious theory of government (albeit one that often looked monopolical in practice) into a republican context? There was no easy or

75 For the southern experience in the 1970s and 1980s, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation, see: Fred Halliday, Revolution and Foreign Policy: The Case of South Yemen 1967 – 1987, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
76 During the late 1980s, after nearly a decade of Şāliḥ’s rule, some Yemeni commentators were already questioning the democratic, by which they meant the voting process in Yemen, as a means to producing the best government. See, for instance, ‘Abdullāh al-Baraddīnī, al-Yaman al-jumḥūrī, Şanʿā’: Maktubat al-Shurūq al-Thaqāfīyyah, 459.
77 Political unification did, however, allow the Zaydīs through their political party to strike alliances with sayyids in Hadramawt as well as Socialists, but these were political calculations borne out of fear. It presented them opportunities in a system they had never wanted to be a part of.
obvious solution. It was a paradox they could never quite solve. And in the end, they simply sliced through the knot, abandoning the imāmate as an historical artifact. It was a time, they said, for looking forward not backward. Although the civil war of the 1960s had brought an end to the Hamid al-Dīn imāmate, the institution itself had lived on in the memory of Zaydīs, nourished by the teachings of the sayyids and fortified by a knowledge of the past that had seen the power of the office wax and wane over the centuries. Many sayyids believed, taking a long view of history, that the institution wasn’t gone but merely dormant. Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq’s clarifying statement, however, killed even the theoretical possibility of a return, relegating the central feature of Zaydism to the dustbin of history. In the words of one scholar: “An institution which once defined Zaydism was thus done away with in a few pages.”

According to Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq, the political voice of Zaydīs in Yemen after unity, now anyone could lead the community; descent and learning were no longer prerequisites. All that mattered was protecting Islam and the country. It begged the question: without an imām or even acknowledging the possibility of one were Zaydīs still Zaydis? Put slightly differently: didn’t abandoning the imāmate mean abandoning Zaydism? A number of Zaydī scholars had issues with the way Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq was restructuring Zaydism in an effort to make it more palatable to the state. This wasn’t just a modernization; it was a castration. These dissenters tended to view their colleagues in Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq as more concerned with political expediency and personal profit than with tradition and truth. But they kept silent, preferring a life on the political margins to open conflict with little possibility for victory. As vom Bruck explains: “The cultural response

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78 Some have suggested that Iran – theocracy in Republican clothes – may be a potential precedent, which, in to this line of thinking, explains Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthí’s interest and visit to the country. A more convincing argument for al-Ḥūthí’s visit is his search for a suitable exile when in danger in Yemen. The two, of course, are not mutually exclusive, but it seems the formed came out of the latter.
79 Haykel, “Rebellion, Migration or Consultative Democracy?” 198-199.
80 Haykel, “Rebellion, Migration or Consultative Democracy?” 199.
81 Haykel, “Rebellion, Migration or Consultative Democracy?” 199.
to the Sunni reform movement has been formulated in such a way as to simultaneously reconcile (Zaydism) with Republican ideology and to present a reformed (Zaydism) as a viable alternative to certain Sunni schools.”\(^{82}\) It was only much later, when war and personal loss had stripped them of caution that some gave public voice to private thoughts. One of the dissenting clergymen was Badr al-Dīn al-Hūthī who would later describe Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq’s leadership as consisting of men who “follow the state perhaps because they are afraid of it.”\(^{83}\) The Zaydī traditionalists were being backed into a corner first by the religious institutes, then by al-Wādiʿī’s anti-sayyid Salafism, and now by unification and political adaptation.

**The Post-Unification Reign and Rule of ʿAlī ʿAbdullāh Śāliḥ**

There were other problems with unification. From the very beginning Śāliḥ attempted to undermine his vice president and partner in unification, ʿAlī Sālim al-Bīḍ, inviting exiles back into the country and using fighters from Afghanistan to isolate and exterminate the socialists in the south.\(^{84}\) Eventually, in 1994, the assassinations and ambushes morphed into a brief but bloody civil war.\(^{85}\) Zaydī traditionalists had largely stayed out of the war. They had been on the defensive for years and they were looking for a way to hit back, to protect their interests. The government wasn’t going to do it, and Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq had failed. The party had never really been a viable option, electing only two members to parliament in 1993.\(^{86}\) It was as much a problem with form as with substance. Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī was still out of the country. Following the attempt on his life in the late 1970s, he had fled for safer lands. He initially sought refuge with

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\(^{82}\) Vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory and Morality*, 246. See also the work of Laurent Bonnefoy on Salafis in and around Ṣa‘dah.


\(^{84}\) Gregory D. Johnsen, *The Last Refuge, Yemen, al-Qaeda and America’s War in Arabia*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2012, provides an overview of Śāliḥ’s use of Islamists fighters to undermine his socialist partners.


\(^{86}\) One of these, however, was Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī, one of Badr al-Dīn’s sons, and the first leader of what came to be known as the Ḥūthī movement.
fellow Zaydīs in Najrān just north of the border and when that failed, he attempted to travel to Jordan, which also refused to receive him. Finally, exhausted and nearly out of options he made his way to Iran, where he would remain for the next several years. Badr al-Dīn had left behind a number of students, many of whom had flocked to him out of frustration with the leadership of other supposed Zaydīs who were, at least according to the students, standing idly by as their religion was being eradicated. With their teachers either on the run or compromised by the state, these young Zaydīs decided to take matters into their own hands.

In late 1994, as the civil war wound to a close, Muḥammad al-Ḥūthī and Muḥammad ʿIzzān, the pair who started a Zaydī summer school with eight students seven years earlier, had by now managed to transform that single school into a series of centers and study circles throughout the Ṣaʿdah governorate that would eventually serve 15,000 students. ʿIzzan would later say that 1994 was the year the movement “crystallized.” Not surprisingly, the Zaydī pushback was met with resistance by the various strands of Salafism which viewed Saʿdah and the surrounding regions as untapped territory prime for proselytizing and conversions. Students like ʿIzzān, one of these outside visitors wrote that same year, were working for the “preservation of the Zaydī-Yemeni heritage from extinction because of the onslaught of a proselytizing Wahhabi movement in such traditional Zaydī provinces as Ṣaʿdah and al-Jawf combined with neglect and opposition to Zaydī concerns and issues by the government in Ṣanʿāʾ.”

The problems worsened for the Zaydīs in the aftermath of the civil war when Islah took over the Ministry of Education as part of the post-war payout. This was part of Šāliḥ’s so-called snake dance, playing domestic rivals against one another. Šāliḥ used Islah, an Islamic grouping

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headed by Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar and populated by tribesmen and members of the Muslim
Brotherhood, as well as other Islamists to combat and defeat the socialists, which in 1994 had
been his primary enemy. Later, when he judged Islah and the Islamists to be growing too strong
in the aftermath of the 1997 parliamentary elections, he would empower the Zaydīs as a
counterweight. But for the moment, Islah was on the ascendancy, and it was Zaydi books that
were being suppressed and its preachers harassed.89 One self-declared apolitical Zaydi scholar in
Ṣan‘ā’, al-Murtaḍa al-Mahāṭwarī, was arrested and his center closed.90 Others complained of
more subtle forms of abuse. As parliamentary elections loomed in 1997, the government
realized it might have overreached in its suppression of the Zaydīs. Islah controlled the portfolios
at both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice, and looked to be growing stronger.
With the socialists in tatters and no longer a possible counterweight to Islah, Ṣāliḥ started to
empower the Zaydī traditionalists. Ṣāliḥ’s divide-and-rule approach to governing played
different factions against one another as a way of keeping all of them perpetually dependent on
the center. It was a constant balancing act – dancing on the heads of snakes – and in his post-
election cabinet, Ṣāliḥ tapped the head of Hizb al-Haqq, Aḥmad al-Shāmī, as the Minister of
Religious Endowments, a move not only designed to restore some Zaydi strength but also, and
more importantly, one that would limit Islah’s reach. All sides saw religious education as a zero-
sum game; a win for the Zaydīs was a loss for the Salafis. But the move, while symbolic, was
largely ineffective; al-Shāmī would resign within the year. Instead, Ṣāliḥ started diverting
government money and resources to the real heart of Zaydi power in the country: the Believing
Youth.

90 Haykel, “Rebellion, Migration, or Consultative Democracy?” 200.
The Zaydīs, as we will see in chapter nine, put this presidential support to good use, as they added schools and strengthened their ranks. The Zaydīs had been oppressed for nearly three decades, since the end of the civil war in 1970. Only in the late 1990s did they again find themselves as a beneficiary of state largesse. But it would be short lived. By 2000, Ṣāliḥ’s political calculations had changed again, and once more the Zaydīs were on the outside looking in. By that point, however, long-standing issues and grievances as well as the fear of religious and cultural extinction, which had been simmering just out of sight, would come to the surface in a series of wars that would aim to resolve one of the unanswered questions of the civil war in the 1960s: what role should Zaydī theology play in Yemen? Was the Republic anti-Zaydī, anti-sayyid, a Zaydī state without an imām, or something else entirely? In many ways, the six Ḥūthī wars in the early 2000s, and the Ḥūthī takeover of Ṣan‘ā’ in 2015 both stemmed from the war in the 1960s. It was the civil war, one generation later.
This chapter focuses on the years from 2000 to 2014, or roughly from the return of Ḥusayn Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī to the Ḥūthī takeover of the central government in Ṣan‘ā’. In between those two events are the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and years of counterterrorism operations as well as the Arab Spring of 2011 and 2012 and the long winter that followed, all of which have had a major impact on Yemen. The terrorist attacks changed geopolitical concerns in the region, and the Arab Spring ultimately led to the resignation of ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ as president of Yemen, which helped precipitate the bloody and protracted war that has followed. But this chapter begins with the state of Zaydī sayyids at the turn of the century. The first section builds on the arguments made in chapter eight, which showed Zaydī sayyids being marginalized and discriminated against by the central government in Ṣan‘ā’. This helps to illustrate why by the beginning of the twenty-first century a portion of the Zaydī community was ready to fight. Much of this argument is made through an examination of the life of Ḥusayn Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī, a scholar and charismatic political leader. Al-Ḥūthī is representative of the Zaydī revivalist community for three reasons. First, he was a sayyid, a member of the class that suffered the most after the civil war of the 1960s. Second, he was one of only three individuals to win a seat in parliament through the Zaydī political party Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq that was formed in a period of political opening after the unification of north and south Yemen in 1990. Al-Ḥūthī’s political career as a member of parliament tracks closely with a segment of the Zaydī political elite, who in the early 1990s were still willing to work within the Republican system in an attempt to find a way to move forward that satisfied both their religious beliefs and traditions while at the same time remaining within the Republican system. Al-
Ḥūthī’s failure to find a solution to the tensions between these two commitments mirrors a similar failure in the broader Zaydī community. The third reason to focus on Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī is that he became the first political leader to take up arms against the state in an effort to defend Zaydī teachings and traditions. The group he led would become known as the Ḥūthīs, after his patronymic and his family has continued to lead the group to this day. The Ḥūthīs, however, call themselves Anṣār Allāh (God’s Supporters).

The second, and largest portion of this chapter, deals with the six Ḥūthī wars that span the years from 2004 to 2010. Significant space is devoted to these wars because, in many ways, they are another pivot point of modern Yemeni history. The Ḥūthī wars link the past to the present. They are in some sense a continuation of the civil war of the 1960s, and a precursor to the Ḥūthī takeover of Ṣan‘ā’ in late 2014 and early 2015, and the Saudi-led war that followed. More than three decades after the conclusion of the civil war, the Ḥūthī wars were a Zaydī response to institutionalized discrimination and repression. But they were also something more. The wars illustrated that for the Zaydī sayyids and their followers it was impossible to remain true to their beliefs – to be a Zaydī in the absence of an imām – while at the same time remaining a full citizen of a Republic. Part of this, as we saw in chapter eight, was a result of the central government’s actions in Ṣa‘dah, which were calculated to marginalize Zaydī sayyids and left little room for compromise. The Zaydīs in Ṣa‘dah felt they had to fight before there was nothing left for which to fight. The Ḥūthī wars are also important because they are giving shape to the future. Whatever emerges from the current conflict, Yemen will be forced to grapple with the demands and the grievances that first led the Ḥūthīs to take up arms against the government in 2004.
The third section deals with ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ, his style of rule, particularly the politics of marriage he pursued in Yemen, as well as the end of his regime in 2012. Throughout the Ḥūthī wars both Ṣāliḥ and the Ḥūthīs understood the context differently and acted out of different traditions. For Ṣāliḥ, as we saw in the last chapter, this was part of using weak centers of power to balance out stronger ones in order to remain in power. When the Muslim Brotherhood wing of Iṣlāḥ got too strong, Ṣāliḥ strengthened the Zaydī Shabāb al-Muʿminīn. When the Zaydīs became too powerful, Ṣāliḥ reversed the equation. But in 2000, the Huthīs didn’t see Ṣāliḥ’s maneuvering as another tweak of his style of ruling in order to stay in power. They saw it as a step toward their eradication. Understood this way, the actions – the mistakes and miscalculations – of both sides come into sharper focus. Ṣāliḥ was doing what he always did, and he couldn’t understand why this time it wasn’t working. The Huthīs, on the other hand, were finally reacting after decades of being docile and on the defensive. Ṣāliḥ had been so weakened by the successive wars that by the time the Arab Spring started in early 2011 he was unable to survive as president. However, because of how Ṣāliḥ had ruled for the last 30 years, particularly by marrying his relatives to elite families, he was able to avoid the fate of other presidents such as Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, and Qaddafi in Libya. Ṣāliḥ resigned the presidency but was allowed to remain in Yemen, where he continued to play domestic rivals against one other.

The fourth and final section of this chapter focuses on the years from 2012 to 2014, or from when Ṣāliḥ stepped down to when the Ḥūthīs took over the central government in Ṣanʿā’. That move, of course, sparked a Saudi-led air campaign, which has now morphed into a brutal and bloody eight-sided civil war that has nearly destroyed the country. The war is ongoing and therefore much of it remains beyond the scope of this work. Indeed both because of a limited
number of sources as well as the fact that many of the events dealt with in this section are still very much continuing, by necessity this section is limited. However, even with those restrictions in place it is possible to argue two things. First, the Zaydī rebellion – although it was never termed “khurūj” and the Ḥūthīs have been careful to avoid talk of restoring the imāmate – has been successful. Whatever government Yemen has after this war is concluded will have to deal in some way with Zaydī grievances if there is to be a functioning state. The question of what it means to be a Zaydī in the absence of an imām, which has been postponed since the end of the civil war in 1970, will need to be answered. The Ḥūthī wars and their takeover of the government in Ṣan‘ā’ was the response of a cornered community, who felt in danger of eradication. Their battlefield successes have ensured that they will have to be part of the political process. This was something that was largely neglected in 2012 when Ṣāliḥ resigned, but their push into Ṣan‘ā’ made certain that would not happen again. Whether any political solution will be able to accommodate both Zaydīs as well as Salafis and Shafi‘īs, of course, is unknowable at this time. The second thing that can be argued, even as events continue to unfold, is that the historic imāmate is unlikely to return, at least in the form it took under the Ḥamīd al-Dīn imāms. Years of government repression have weakened tribal support, which was necessary for the imāms to rule. A miniature imāmate based in Ṣa‘dah may be possible, but even that seems doubtful. Whatever the future holds, whether inside the Yemeni state or outside, both the Zaydī traditionalist community and the rest of Yemen is going to be forced to wrestle with what it means for their community to live in a post-imāmic age.

Zaydī Sayyids in Republican Yemen

The Zaydī scholars and thinkers who came of age in the forty years between 1962 and 2002 were, in many respects, a lost generation. The imāmate was gone, a historic relic.
Politically, Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq, the Zaydi party, was a non-entity. Small and ideologically confused, it only managed a few seats in the republican parliament. Young Zaydi men had been traveling to Saudi for years, economic refugees like Muqbil al-Wādi‘ī who in many cases took on the doctrinal practices of their hosts. Some of these “converts,” as we saw in the last chapter, returned to Ṣa‘dah as missionaries. Zaydism was disappearing, eroding on two fronts.

Religiously, the next generation was slipping away and, politically, the Zaydīs were just one more party in search of a platform. Something had to change for Zaydism as a religious manifestation/cultural tradition to survive. This generation of Zaydī scholars was charting a new course. The past was not a prologue to this future. There seemed few options other than the radical options of either “emigrating” (hijra) into a remote rural place of exile (also called hijra) or rebelling militarily against the unjust government in Ṣan‘ā’. Living amidst their enemies in the heart of a republic, they struggled to answer the same single, fundamental question they had been wrestling with since the end of the civil war: what did it mean to be a Zaydī in the absence of an imam?¹

Into this problem stepped Ḥusayn Badr al-Dīn al-Hūthī, who was born in 1956, six years before the coup and the civil war that followed. He’d grown up in the republic, in a world in which his status as sayyid was more of a hindrance than a help, especially outside of Ṣa‘dah. As a young man he spent time at the Zaydī religious institutes in Ṣa‘dah before moving to Ṣan‘ā’ to work on a degree in Islamic Law at Ṣan‘ā’ University. His time in Ṣan‘ā’ was later played down by the government, which sought to depict him as fiercely partisan and militantly opposed to all

different forms of religious thought. But Ḫusayn was actually well within the historic currents of Zaydī study: open and willing to take instruction from a variety of teachers from different schools. He’d been one of Ḥizb al-Ḥaqq’s first two members of parliament, winning a seat in 1993. But he decided not to stand for re-election in 1997. Instead, he took the money he was receiving from one of Ṣāliḥ’s private accounts, known locally as i’timād, or support, and went to Sudan to pursue a Master’s degree. In 1997, as we saw in chapter eight, Ṣāliḥ was attempting to balance out Islah’s growing strength in the wake of the 1994 civil war and the collapse of the Yemeni Socialist Party. By 2000, that calculation had changed. Islah looked to be contained, and Ṣāliḥ felt comfortable removing al-Ḥūthī from the list of “support” recipients.

Short of funds, al-Ḥūthī withdrew from his program in Sudan and returned home to Ṣa‘dah. The isolation and anxiety that Ḫusayn al-Ḥūthī helped channel and give voice to in 2001 and 2002 had started forty years earlier with the overthrow of the imāmate. Successive republican governments in Ṣan‘ā’ had dragged their feet on providing services such as electricity, roads, and hospitals to Ṣa‘dah. The city and its surrounding regions had always been the seat of Zaydī power, and the republican presidents in Ṣan‘ā’ treated it as such. A generation of marginalization came to a head with Ṣāliḥ’s removal of al-Ḥūthī from the i’timād. Over the next few years, a series of six wars would once again give Yemen’s Zaydīs political form, first under Ḫusayn al-Ḥūthī and later under his father and brother. The Zaydī rebellion sparked by al-Ḥūthī’s return to Ṣa‘dah would, just as in 1967 and 1968, threaten the republican state. And Ṣāliḥ’s inability to decisively defeat the Ḫuthīs would, within a decade, create strange political bedfellows and lead to a Ḫūthī play for power.

The Ḫūthī Wars and the End of the Republic

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2 Interview with a Yemeni diplomat, who requested anonymity. Interview took place in June 2012.
Shortly after noon on June 18, 2004 just as Friday prayers at the Great Mosque in Ṣan‘ā’ were coming to a close, a number of Zaydī activists began chanting: “God is Great! Death to America! Death to Israel! A Curse upon the Jews! Victory for Islam!” The chants echoed through the narrow alleys of Ṣan‘ā’s old city, sparking a crackdown by plainclothes security officers, who had been monitoring the prayers, and their uniformed backup. The Yemeni government’s security services had been breaking up similar demonstrations for more than a year. During the first six months of 2004 it had already arrested nearly 800 Zaydīs at the Great Mosque alone.³ And by early June the government had finally had enough.

The chants were an insult to the regime and, more pointedly, a subversive attack on President Ṣāliḥ. The Zaydī demonstrators protested the charge with wide-eyed innocence, claiming they were seeking only to “defend Islam.”⁴ But what they were doing was clear to everyone in Yemen. The Zaydīs were using popular frustration against US and Israeli policies in the Middle East to both engender local support and to criticize implicitly President Ṣāliḥ. In a world of parallels, where international politics are seen through a local prism, they could criticize both by chanting against one. Muslims worldwide were under attack from the US and Israel, just as Zaydīs in Ṣa‘dah – the true Muslims – were under attack from Ṣāliḥ and his government. Ṣāliḥ didn’t mind the stated portion of the chants, it was the subtext, which cast him as the local equivalent to the US and Israel, that rankled. Some Zaydī scholars saw the growing frustration and anger in their ranks and realized the potential for disaster. ‘Alī Yaḥyā al-‘Imād, a prominent Zaydī scholar, warned the imam of the Great Mosque that the demonstrations and chants would eventually come back to hurt the community.⁵ But his efforts, and those of other Zaydī leaders eager for reconciliation, failed to defuse the impending crisis. Ṣāliḥ would later say that he first

³ “Muqābahah ma‘ Ḥasan Zayd” Elaph, October 2, 2009.
heard the chants in February 2003 after Friday prayers outside the Imam al-Ḥādī Mosque in Ṣa‘dah, the traditional seat of Zaydī power in the country’s far north. The stop was supposed to be an afterthought, a short public appearance on his way to perform the Hajj in Saudi Arabia along with Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-ḥmar, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Zīndānī and a handful of other dignitaries. But instead of the perfunctory sermon and fawning adulation he expected, Ṣāliḥ was greeted with criticism and chants. The issue simmered on for another year-and-a-half before finally boiling over.

In June 2004, just as things were coming to a head in Ṣan‘ā’, the government decided to attack the root of the problem in Ṣa‘dah by arresting Ḥusayn Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī, the man it pegged as the leader of the demonstrators. President Ṣāliḥ dispatched a relative and the military’s most powerful commander, ‘Alī Muḥsin al-ḥmar, to oversee the operation. Al-ḥmar headed the 1st Armored Division, from its base in Ṣan‘ā’, and was very close to the country’s Salafi and Wahhabi groups as well to a number of Afghan Arabs, many of whom he utilized to great effect in the 1994 Civil War. On June 18, al-Ḥūthī’s followers took over a government mosque in Ṣa‘dah, expelling the caretaker and the preacher, both of whom were on the government payroll.

The next day more local security officials and soldiers came under fire from men the government would later describe as supporters of al-Ḥūthī. It was clear to everyone that the situation was about to explode. Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-ḥmar, who was being treated for cancer in Riyadh, called the president in a plea for calm. He asked Ṣāliḥ to grant al-Ḥūthī a delay, which would give him an opportunity to travel to Ṣan‘ā’ and turn himself in.

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8 Ibid, 267.
instead of being arrested. The president agreed to a 24-hour extension. But before the new
deadline expired the situation was already spinning out of control. On the morning of June 20,
armed gunmen attacked a military checkpoint inside the city of Ṣa’dah, killing three soldiers. Sāliḥ’s governor was turned back by armed tribesmen as he attempted to reach al-Ḥūthī’s house,
but returned later that day with military reinforcements who were met with heavy fire. The
fighting, in what would become known as the Ḥūthī wars, had begun.

In Yemen’s newspapers, the government claimed that Ḥūṣayn al-Ḥūthī had declared
himself imām. The charge pushed Ḥūṣayn al-Ḥūthī beyond the bounds of a political dissident
and into the realm of a traitor, a revanchist of the ancien régime. The government eventually
smoothed out its rhetorical bumps and constructed a more coherent narrative. The Ḥūthīs, as Ḥūṣayn’s followers came to be known in the press, were an Iranian proxy, operating on Saudi
Arabia’s southern border. The charge was a carefully calculated attempt to link Yemen’s
domestic problems to larger regional and western concerns. Saudi Arabia, always concerned
with the potential for unrest among domestic Shi‘a in its oil-rich eastern province, was
hypersensitive to the possibility of Iranian meddling anywhere on the Arabian Peninsula, in
much the same way it had once been to Nasser’s attempts to spread his influence in the 1960s.
And the US was learning firsthand the dangers of sectarian clashes in Iraq. The simple binary
division of the conflict also played well in the western press.

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9 “Muqābahah ma‘ Hasan Zayd.”
11 Iris Glosemeyer, “Local Conflict, Global Spin: An Uprising in the Yemeni Highlands,” trans. Don Reneau,
_Middle East Report_, Fall 2004, 44-46.
13 Iris Glosemeyer, “Local Conflict, Global Spin: An Uprising in the Yemeni Highlands,” _Middle East Report_,
Fall 2004, 46.
14 For an example of some of this early reporting in the western press see, for example: Nicholas Blanford, “Are Iran
The government maintains that it negotiated throughout the conflict in good faith. But Yahyā al-Ḥūthī, a member of parliament for the ruling GPC and a key player on multiple mediation teams, later argued that early attempts to reach a ceasefire with his brother failed because the government used the brief pauses to carry out attacks with helicopter gunships.\footnote{Muḥammad bin Salam, “Interview with Yahyā al-Ḥūthī,” \textit{Yemen Times}, June 20, 2005, 3.} Still, his accusations came only after he had broken with the government and joined most of his family in support of the movement his brother led. In addition to Yahyā, the government also compelled Ḥusayn’s father, Badr al-Dīn, and a handful of other family members to serve as mediators in an attempt to force Ḥusayn’s surrender. The make-up of the different negotiating teams helps to explain the government’s evolving thinking about al-Ḥūthī. At first, they largely consisted of family members, Zaydī scholars and sayyids, but as failures continued to mount, the scope of participants widened significantly.\footnote{Details of the different committees can be found in a report that ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Anṣī, the head of the National Security Bureau, submitted to parliament in 2007. The report was later printed in the military’s official newspaper, “Report of al-Anṣī to Parliament,” \textit{26 Siptimbr}, February 15, 2007.}

In late June, shortly after Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī had his phone lines cut by the government, he sent a handwritten letter to President Ṣāliḥ expressing his frustration with the situation. Much of the letter was subsequently translated and published by the \textit{Yemen Times}, a quasi-oppositional newspaper, which managed to obtain a copy. The one-page letter is short and to the point. Al-Ḥūthī claimed he was surprised at Ṣāliḥ’s displeasure with him, writing: “I am certain that I have done nothing that would lead to such a feeling. I do not work against you.”\footnote{Muḥammad bin Salam, “Al-Ḥuthī Appeals,” \textit{Yemen Times}, June 28, 2004, pp. 1 and 4.} Near the bottom of the one-page letter, al-Ḥūthī ends with a direct appeal to the president. “I am by your side, so do not listen to hypocrites and provocateurs and trust that I am more sincere and honest (with) you than they are. When we meet, if God is willing, I will talk to you about matters that are of great concern to you all.”
Al-Ḥūthi’s letter was one of the final off-ramps on the road to war, but by this point Ṣāliḥ was already committed. The government, like Egyptian forces during the civil war, maintained control of urban areas, but it could never quite assert itself in the rural regions. Al-Ḥūthī and his followers saw themselves as the defenders of a community under attack and in danger of cultural eradication, facing a two-pronged threat from the government and local Salafis. Despite the religious rhetoric on all sides, the Ḩūthīs are primarily a group driven by the local politics of Ṣa‘dah. In addition to its perfunctory attempts at dialogue, the Yemeni government continued to pressure al-Ḥūthī, announcing a $55,000 reward for his arrest in mid-July, on the eve of yet another attempt at mediation. Throughout the summer, al-Ḥūthī’s supporters were slowly pushed deeper into the mountains, as the government’s superior numbers and firepower began to make itself felt. The Ḩūthīs regrouped in two regions, Marran and Nashūr, around the leadership of the two former MPs, Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī and his top deputy ‘Abdullāh al-Ruzamī, respectively.

All the killing and destruction was threatening to expand the conflict from a standard, binary clash between the government and the Ḩūthīs into a much more complex and protracted war full of revenge killings and tribal feuds that could last for years. This, of course, was in marked contrast to the end of the civil war in 1970 in which Royalists simply became Republicans. The difference, then, was that few Royalists really knew what it meant to be a Republican. There was no imām, or at least no Ḥamīḍ al-Dīn imām, but the assumption for many was that they could remain Zaydī. Three decades of the Republic and unification had demonstrated that one could remain Zaydī in name but not in practice. The Ḩūthī uprisings were

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19 Indeed, many of these intra-family and intra-clan conflicts continued to simmer even during times of relative peace. As the Ḩūthīs grew in power in 2014 and 2015, they took revenge on their enemies for actions carried out a decade earlier.
a response to this realization, an attempt to fight before there was nothing and no one left to fight for.

On September 10, three days after he ran out of water, a small group of soldiers and private militiamen, acting under ‘Alī Muḥsin al-Ąḥmar’s authority, stumbled upon al-Ḥūthī’s hideout. According to the story told to the Yemeni writer ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Mujāhid by an individual who claimed to be present at the end, al-Ḥūthī first sent out two of his wives, one of whom was nursing a small child. The women were in bad shape, dirty and clothed in rags. Ḫūsayn shouted the same thing he had been saying for months: that he would only surrender to President Ṣāliḥ. According to al-Mujāhid’s source, al-Ḥūthī had a pistol in the pocket of his pants and as he stepped out of the cave he reportedly made a move towards it and one of the soldiers opened fire, fatally wounding the 48-year-old. “We don’t know whether al-Ḥuthī thought that he was going to continue his attacks or whether he wanted to surrender,” al-Mujāhid’s source told him. The government later estimated its losses at 473 dead and 2,588 wounded, although others put the numbers at much higher. The losses of both sides were dwarfed by the civilian casualties and economic damages brought on by three months of war.

After al-Ḥūthī’s death the fighting dissolved into a tentative ceasefire, as government forces slowly receded back to urban areas leaving al-Ḥūthī’s supporters in control of some districts. In January 2005, Badr al-Dīn al-Huthī came down from the mountains to oversee the negotiations. Now that Ḫusayn was dead, his aging and ill father saw himself as the protector of the community. It fell to him, ill or not, to attempt to remedy the situation. The frail cleric was hardly the best choice for a negotiator. Scholarly and short-tempered, he was ill at ease among contemporary politicians. And the family was stuck. Fearful of government reprisals and unsure

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of what was acceptable, no one in Ṣan‘ā’ was willing to rent a house or apartment to them. Finally, Yaḥyā al-‘Imād, a fellow Zaydī scholar, who had made public his opposition to Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī’s political stance, took pity on the family and offered them the use of one of his houses in the city.23 Although al-‘Imād had sided with the government during the fighting, he also defended the Ḥuthīs from being slandered as Iranian agents or Twelver Shi’a. “How could they be Ja’farīs?,” he asked rhetorically during an interview with the weekly al-Wasat, using an alternate term for Twelvers. Badr al-Dīn, he continued in an answer to his own question, escaped from Iran because they were pressuring him to become a Twelver.

Increasingly upset with the situation and feeling as though he was making little progress in Ṣan‘ā’, Badr al-Dīn spoke out in a rare interview, talking to the editor of al-Wasat in early March. His frustration was palpable. When asked if he had met with the president, his answer was an abrupt: “I have not met with him.”24


“No, I met with him two years ago.”

The issue, at least for Badr al-Dīn, was closed. The interview was his final overture, but even before it was published he left Ṣan‘ā’ to return to Ṣa’dah.

Fighting broke out again on March 19 the same day Badr al-Dīn’s interview was published in al-Wasat.25 Ṣāliḥ’s brinkmanship, which had served him so well in so many different crises over the past three decades, was beginning to fail him. Ṣāliḥ directed a handful of intermediaries to negotiate with ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī, the youthful successor to his father and older brother. The talks sputtered on throughout the summer with little progress. Much like


his father before him, the twenty-five-year-old ‘Abd al-Malik was quickly frustrated by the process. Offers were made and details discussed, but there was no meeting with Šāliḥ and, absent his personal involvement, the issue was kept in some sort of strange bureaucratic limbo. In August, ‘Abd al-Malik went public with the talks, telling al-Wasat – the same paper his father had spoken to five months earlier – that he was cutting off all negotiations with the government. He explained that his decision was based on the fact that the government was torturing Hūthī prisoners in Ṣa‘dah and Šan‘ā’. 

In a speech celebrating the 43rd anniversary of the 1962 revolution in the central highland city of Ta‘izz, Šāliḥ made his move. The September 25 speech, on the eve of the revolutionary celebrations, was an incredible piece of showmanship by a talented politician. Šāliḥ told his audience that he was announcing a general amnesty for all Hūthī prisoners, saying that despite the massive loss of life in the two wars the time had come to put an end to the bloodshed. He went even further, claiming that he wanted to right the wrongs of history and that he would begin by ordering that the exiled family of the last imams of Yemen, the Ḥamīd al-Dīns, be compensated for the property they lost during the 1962-70 Civil War. By linking the amnesty for the Hūthī prisoners to the compensation for the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family, Šāliḥ connected the present to the past. Doing both on the anniversary of the revolution only emphasized his point. The same forces that Yemen combated in the 1960s still needed to be defeated today.

The third Hūthī war – November 2005 to February 2006 – was more localized than its predecessors. Much as Šāliḥ had done throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Yemen was willing to use anybody it could to help it combat its enemy of the moment. This meant packaging the

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conflict as part of the global war on terror for the US, while telling the Saudis that the Ḥūthīs were an Iranian proxy.

In the north, the absence of war held for almost a year; long enough for Ṣāliḥ to win re-election in September 2006 and for both sides to regroup for another round, but that was it. Four months later, the al-Ḥūthī conflict was on again; the fourth round of a war that wouldn’t end; none of the underlying issues had been dealt with. Yemen’s Zaydīs were still grappling with what it meant to live in a republic. On January 27, 2007 another round of fighting started. Over the next few months, the fighting far exceeded previous limits as the government flooded the area with tribal allies. The vast majority of these were Ḥāshid fighters from the mountains north of Ṣan‘ā’, sparking fears that the conflict might morph into a tribal war pitting Yemen’s two largest confederations, Ḥāshid and Bakīl, against each other. Ṣa’dah has always been outside Ḥāshid territory and fiddling with its tribal makeup by inserting outside paramilitary forces – men considered foreigners by the local population – risked expanding the battlefield from a single governorate to much of northern Yemen.²⁸

On February 1, 2008 representatives from each side signed a 14-point final peace accord. The deal stipulated an immediate halt to all military operations, the removal of Yaḥyā al-Ḥūthī’s name from Interpol’s watch-list and included a provision that called for ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī, Abd al-Karīm al-Ḥūthī and ‘Abdullāh al-Ruzāmī to go into exile in Qatar. But none of it mattered. Like other attempts, the deal collapsed almost as soon as it was signed.

The fifth Ḥūthi war started that spring. On April 18, a member of parliament from Ṣāliḥ’s ruling-GPC, Ṣāliḥ al-Hindā, and three of his sons were ambushed and killed in Ṣa’dah. Within weeks the fighting, which had been limited to Ṣa’dah and a border district in ‘Amrān,

spread throughout the country, dipping as far south as Ibb, 120 miles below the capital and nearly 300 miles from the war zone. The one big war the government had been fighting was spawning a number of little ones. Ḥāshid fighters had triggered a reaction, and tribes were picking up arms to restore what they considered to be the proper balance of power and to press for whatever advantage they could. At one point in late May, a Ḥūthī advance made it to within 12 miles of the capital before being turned back. On July 17, Ṣāliḥ used another speech – this time the 30th anniversary of his ascension to the presidency – to announce an immediate ceasefire.

One year later, on November 4, 2009, the five-year war between the Yemeni government and Ḥūthī fighters finally spilled over the border into Saudi Arabia. In August, the Yemeni government launched what it termed “Operation Scorched Earth.” The idea was to swiftly and decisively defeat the Ḥūthīs. Although the Yemeni government put an estimated 40,000 soldiers into the fight, this did not happen. Both the US and Saudi Arabia also aided the Yemeni government by providing targeting intelligence. The Saudis also started flying air raids against Ḥūthī targets in and around Ṣa’dah. ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ, however, attempted to use Saudi involvement as a way to eliminate ‘Alī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar as a rival to his son, at one point passing along intelligence to the Saudis that al-Aḥmar’s headquarters was a rebel target. The

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29 J.E. Peterson, Al-Huthī Affair, July 1, 2008.
30 J.E. Peterson, Al-Huthī Affair, July 1, 2008.
31 Parts of this section have been adapted from Gregory D. Johnsen “The Sixth War,” The National, November 12, 2009.
strike was averted at the last minute when a Saudi pilot felt something was off and aborted the mission.\footnote{US Diplomatic Cable released via Wikileaks, Amb. James Smith, “Saudi Arabia: Renewed Assurances on Satellite Imagery,” February 7, 2010. Available here: \url{https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10RIYADH159_a.html} For news coverage of the story, see: Peter Walker, “Wikileaks: Yemen Tricked Saudis into nearly bombing President’s Rival,” \textit{Guardian}, April 8, 2011.}

In addition to air strikes, the Saudis also used ground forces to combat the Ḣūthīs in late 2009 and early 2010. The Ḣūthīs claim the fighting started when they responded to repeated strikes by the Yemeni military, which was using Saudi territory as a rear base to launch flanking maneuvers into Ṣa‘dah. Saudi Arabia responded by deploying troops to its southern border and launched air and ground assaults on pockets of Ḩūthī fighters, purportedly to drive them back across the border. Like the air strikes, the ground incursions did not go as planned. Saudi troops were frequently outmaneuvered and, at times, Ḩūthī forces looted Saudi camps, making off with uniforms, weapons and vehicles. In early 2010, Ḩūthī fighters posted several videos on YouTube, showing its tribal fighters driving around in Saudi military jeeps. These videos were incredibly embarrassing for the Saudis, which had poured millions into its military only to have it upstaged by a group of barefoot Yemenis. This embarrassment would also, as we will see, help spark Saudi Arabia’s decision to launch an air war against the Ḩūthīs in 2015.

The sixth war ended with a cease fire in February 2010, but already the series of wars had drastically altered the political landscape in Yemen. The protracted nature of the war led to evolving justifications for its continuation. Throughout the various rounds of conflict, the fighting spread well beyond the core group of Zaydī and Hashimī purists who supported Ḥusayn al-Ḥūthī in 2004 to include a number of different tribesmen, who were responding to government destruction of crops, land and homes. Much of the destruction was presumably unintentional, but government shelling throughout the war has often been indiscriminate. This means that what
was once a three-sided conflict between the government, its Salafī allies and the Hūthīs became much more complex. Many of those who backed the Hūthīs did so not out of any adherence to Zaydī theology or doctrine but rather as a response to government overreach and military mistakes. In effect, after six rounds of fighting, the government’s various military campaigns had created more enemies than it had when the conflict began. As one local politician put it: “The war has created numerous interests that have extended a culture of war.”34 It also weakened ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ to the point that he was unable to survive much longer as president of Yemen.

The Arab Uprisings and Ṣāliḥ Steps Down

On December 17, 2010 a fruit vendor named Muḥammad Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest the confiscation of his fruit cart by local police in Tunisia. That act sparked a series of popular uprisings across the Arab world, which have since come to be known as the “Arab Spring.” In Yemen, protestors took to the streets as well, calling for ‘Alī ‘Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ to step down. He eventually agreed to a deal – brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council, the US, and the UN – that would allow him to step down from power in exchange for full immunity. Even after the deal had been struck, Ṣāliḥ still balked, pulling out three times just before he was supposed to sign the deal. In June 2011, he escaped an assassination attempt when a bomb went off at a mosque where he was praying. But only months later, in February 2012, did he finally agree to step down from power and be replaced by his deputy and long-serving vice president, ‘Abd Rabbū Hādī. The delays and deals were all part of Ṣāliḥ’s “snake dance,” but unlike previous maneuvering and manipulation, this time he was only partially successful. In order to understand Ṣāliḥ’s successes as well as his failure in 2011 and 2012 and his later alliance with

the Ḥūthīs, it is important to explore how he came to power and how he maintained that position throughout his 33 years in power.

Ṣāliḥ’s strategy was classic hold-and-advance. Instead of pursuing a broad tent approach to ruling, bringing in various clans and tribes as a way of ensuring their support, Ṣāliḥ opted for family rule, a choice that likely saved his life. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, Ṣāliḥ survived a handful of assassination attempts. And slowly, as he gained control of the state apparatus, Ṣāliḥ started to branch out, relying on families his clan had married into, primarily Bayt Ismā‘īl and Bayt al-Qadī, and then, later, marrying his sons and daughters, nieces and nephews into various elite families throughout the country.

There were two flaws with this way of structuring power. The first broader problem was that not all of the armed men in Yemen were in the military, in fact relatively few of them were. The second, narrower, but ultimately more worrying flaw, was that blood ties do not always equate to loyalty. By setting up his relatives and fellow tribesmen as military commanders, Ṣāliḥ was granting them their own personal fiefdoms backed by thousands of armed men, who often identified more with their commander than they did with the abstract concept of the state or even the extended ruling family. The decision greatly reduced the number of would-be challengers, but it also meant that the few that were left were almost entirely within the president’s own house. The most dangerous of these relatives was ‘Alī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar, the powerful military commander of the northwest sector and by extension the man responsible for running the Ḥūthī wars. Ṣāliḥ and ‘Alī Muḥsin came up through the military at the same time. But over the time the two had grown apart. Worried that ‘Alī Muḥsin’s support wouldn’t survive his own death; Ṣāliḥ eventually came to see the Ḥūthī wars as an opportunity to outmaneuver his old friend.
In what was supposed to be his final term in office, Ṣāliḥ was occupied with setting his son up for succession. Shortly after his July 2008 speech and the end of the fifth war, Ṣāliḥ used the general’s inability to decisively defeat the Ḥūthīs as an excuse to begin purging the military of ‘Alī Muḥsin’s loyalists. One of the first to go was the commander of Yemen’s Central region, who was forced into retirement, while the head of military intelligence was kicked upstairs with a new title and little power. Another top general was demoted, and the head of the Republic Guard garrison in Ta’izz was removed on convenient charges of corruption. The Ḥūthī wars were re-branded as “‘Alī Muḥsin’s war” – which would be important in the years to come – and their continued existence was now something that Ṣāliḥ could use to his advantage as he moved pieces around, tilting the game in favor of his son.

But the Ḥūthī wars had also weakened Ṣāliḥ. They had exposed the cracks in the network of family, tribal, and marital alliances he had created over the past three decades. The constancy of the wars also created its own political and economic reality. Ṣāliḥ’s circle of confidantes and trusted advisers – the old wise men of Yemeni politics, who had surrounded him since his rise to power – was shrinking as they died off and as Ṣāliḥ’s suspicion of new, younger faces limited their replacements. Al-ʾAḥmar died in 2007, following men like Abū Shawārib and Yahyā al-Mutawakkil, who had been both important counselors to Ṣāliḥ as well as checks on his behavior. They had been part of the system, bolstering Ṣāliḥ’s rule but also limiting it. Without them – particularly al-ʾAḥmar - Ṣāliḥ increasingly kept his own counsel, separated from his aides by age and experience. On their own, the Ḥūthīs and the destructive nature of the wars weren’t enough to overthrow Ṣāliḥ. That took the popular protests of 2011. But even the combined

35 At the time Yemen was divided into four military quadrants: Northwest, Central, Eastern and Southern. Each of these is under the control of a single commander. This was changed in 2013 as part of the military restructuring under President Ḥādī.
36 “Ṣāliḥ and the Yemeni Succession,” Jane’s Intelligence Digest, August 29, 2008.
pressure of six straight wars and months of popular protests weren’t enough to completely get rid of Śāliḥ. Unlike the Ḥamīd al-Dīn imams, Śāliḥ couldn’t simply be excised and removed from the country. He had integrated his family and clan throughout Yemeni society in such a way that made removing him from the equation nearly impossible. After stepping down, he couldn’t simply be sent into exile like the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family. The Ḥamīd al-Dīn family under Yaḥyā and Aḥmad refused to share power as previous imams had done. The family even reserved the title, Sayf al-Islam for itself instead of sharing it with other sayyid families. Śāliḥ did the opposite, integrating himself into the system and ruling by proxy. He was both in the system in the sense that people depended on his largesse, and above the system in the sense that he could pass responsibility for unpopular decisions onto subordinates and proxies.

Śāliḥ was too weak to hold on to the presidency, but too strong to be sent out of the country. The Ḥūthī wars had weakened him, the protests had overthrown him, but his system of three decades of alliances had saved him from exile and prison. Instead, he remained in Yemen; in the words of one US official, a “private citizen.” But survival in 2011 and 2012 was a political victory and in 2013, while much of Yemen was focused on the National Dialogue Conference, Śāliḥ started plotting a political comeback. Large parts of the military were still loyal to him, and he had enough money to continue to garner support within the country. The UN later estimated that Śāliḥ had amassed more than $60 billion during his time as president. This number is likely an exaggeration. But he still had enough to help undermine Hādī’s interim presidency, which was supposed to last from February 2012 – February 2014.

The Ḥūthī Takeover

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38 Śāliḥ also had large pockets of popular support, both inside and outside of Yemen’s capital. Author’s own observations from field trips in 2012 and 2014.
In February 2014, the UN with the backing of the US and Saudi Arabia, extended Hādī’s interim presidency another two years, which would see it last until 2016. In the north, the Ḥūthīs started pushing south toward Ṣa‘ā’. They had won a series of battles with local tribes in early 2014, which helped them consolidate control over much of the Ṣa‘dah governorate. In taking control of Ṣa‘dah, the Ḥūthīs were aided by two factors. First, there was the issue of government neglect from Ṣan‘ā’. President Hādī had been overwhelmed by the political crises facing him since he took office in early 2012. Hādī had a small domestic base of support, which is why the US and UN often voiced their full support for his policies as a way of attempt to offset his lack of support within Yemen. At the time, Ḥādī was struggling to outmaneuver ‘Alī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar, Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar, and Ṣāliḥ for control of Ṣan‘ā’. He had little time or resources to deal with the Ḥūthīs, who following the sixth war had created a de facto state in and around Ṣa‘dah. The second factor that contributed to the Ḥūthīs rise to power in 2014 was the breakdown in the tribal structure in the north, particularly with Ḥāshid. After the death of ‘Abdullāh al-Aḥmar in 2007, leadership of the tribal confederation passed to his eldest son Ṣādiq. But it was al-Aḥmar’s second son, Ḥamīd, who was politically active and probably in a better position to lead the confederation. Ṣādiq, already in his 50s at the time of his father’s death, had not produced a male heir, which was taken as a lack of masculinity within the tribe. Compounding the problem of leadership within the al-Aḥmar family was the general composure and attitudes of the ten al-Aḥmar brothers, who were often seen as haughty and out of touch in a way their father never was. Additionally, in 2011 the al-Aḥmar brothers had spent time and capital fighting Ṣāliḥ’s forces inside Ṣan‘ā’. All of this meant that when the Ḥūthīs started

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40 Author’s observation on field trip to Ṣan‘ā’ in 2012.
41 Interview with a Yemeni diplomat, who requested anonymity, January 2010. This view has been repeated to the author by multiple sources over a period of years.
pushing south out of Ṣa‘dah, the Ḥāshid confederation was not capable of stopping them.\(^{42}\) By late September 2014, the Ḥūthīs were inside Ṣan‘ā’. They quickly overran ‘Alī Muḥsin’s house as well as those of the al-Aḥmar brothers, posting pictures to social media of Ḥūthic fighters bouncing on beds. Much of this was score-settling. The Ḥūthīs blamed ‘Alī Muḥsin and the al-Aḥmar brothers for the six wars, which had been initiated by Ṣāliḥ. The ex-president’s labeling of the wars as ‘Alī Muḥsin’s project were paying dividends years later. Instead of going after Ṣāliḥ and his allies inside Ṣan‘ā’ the Ḥūthic joined forces with the former president, according to a later UN report. Both Ṣāliḥ and a pair of Ḥūthic commanders were sanctioned by the UN Security Council.\(^{43}\)

In January 2015, the Ḥūthic effectively took over the central government in Ṣan‘ā’, placing Ḥādī under house arrest and forcing him to resign. The US and several other countries closed their embassies and withdrew their diplomats in protest. The US also withdrew Special Forces advisers it had placed at a base in southern Yemen to help with the fight against al-Qaeda. Two months later, in late March, Saudi Arabia launched an air campaign against Ḥūthic targets in Yemen with the expressed intent of defeating them and restoring Ḥādī, who had by this time gone into exile in Saudi Arabia, to power. There appear to be two reasons for Saudi’s decision to intervene militarily against the Ḥūthicis. First, the Saudis were worried that the Ḥūthicis are an Iranian proxy, operating on their southern border. Although the Ḥūthicis likely receive some money from Iran, the latter does not have control the former, and it is too simplistic to see these as mere proxies. The Hūthicis represent a social and political movement that does not owe its existence nor its endurance to Iran. The Ḥūthicis may receive some outside money but they act according to what they were going to do anyway. The second reason was a Saudi desire to erase

the embarrassment their troops suffered in 2009 and 2010 at the hands of the Ḥūthīs. Like Ṣāliḥ’s Scorched Earth campaign, the Saudis in early 2015 tried decisively and definitively to defeat the Ḥūthīs. Like Ṣāliḥ, thus far they have failed. The Saudi-led air campaign has now turned into a ground war that is in its ninth month with no end in sight as Yemen is currently in the midst of a bloody, eight-sided civil war. As the war is still on-going, it is far from clear what will eventually emerge from the rubble. What is clear, however, is that whatever government is ultimately established in Yemen it will be forced to deal with Zaydī grievances if there is to be a functioning state. But for their part, the Ḥūthīs will also be forced, at some point, to wrestle with what it means to be Zaydī in the absence of an imām. The Saudis allowed them to delay dealing with this question in early 2015 by starting a war. The Ḥūthīs have never had to govern Yemen, they haven’t had to make the compromises necessary to hold the country together, and they haven’t been forced to articulate an answer as to how to be Zaydī without an imām. Both of these things will have to happen if Yemen is to move on from the Ḥūthī wars, which were themselves rooted in the unfinished business of the civil war of the 1960s.

The Ḥūthī wars and their takeover of the government in Ṣan‘ā’ was the response of a cornered community, who felt in danger of being made extinct. Their battlefield successes have ensured that they will have to be part of the political process. But, as their failure to hold territory in the south has shown, they will not be able to impose their will on other segments of Yemeni society. The Ḥūthīs will not simply be able to reinstate the imāmate as it was configured under the Ḥāmīd al-Dīn imāms. More than 50 years after the coup that overthrew Muḥammad al-Badr, Yemen – both Zaydīs and Shafi‘īs – will finally be forced to fully reckon with what it means to live in a post-imāmic age.
Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that the Yemeni Civil War of 1962 – 1970 is the pivot point of modern Yemeni history. That war inverted the social, political, and religious pyramid that prior to the war had placed Zaydīs and particularly Zaydī sayyids at the pinnacle in favor of what, at least in theory, was a more egalitarian Republic. Not only did the Zaydī elite lose control of the state, its various wealth-producing mechanisms, and their own privileged status as interpreters and arbiters of religious mores in the new Republic, but they also found themselves actively discriminated against by successive republican regimes. This study has also taken the form of a micro history detailing the key actors and events in modern Yemeni history in order to elucidate what it means to be Zaydī throughout the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first centuries in Yemen.

In many ways the key question this dissertation asks is: what does it mean to be Zaydī in the absence of an imām. In other words, if Zaydīs still ran the state, even if it was no longer an imāmate, could it be a Zaydī state? After the conclusion of the civil war in 1970, with the central government in Ṣanʿā’ struggling to project power, daily life in the traditionally Zaydī northern highlands continued much as before. There was no big break. The civil war overthrew the imamate but it did not change the religious outlook of many Yemenis nor did it end the power and influence of Zaydī sayyids at a local level. Instead there was a gradual erosion of traditional power and prestige as both the state and Zaydī tribal shaykhs, many of whom had fought on the republican side in the war, began to sanction and encourage the discrimination against Zaydī sayyids. This process, which is covered in Part III, eventually led many traditional Zaydī elites to the conclusion that they were in danger of being eradicated through a two-pronged alliance of central government oppression and prosletyzing Salafi missionaries. Their response ultimately
led to the formation of the Ḥūthī movement and six consecutive wars against the central
government from 2004 – 2010. This dissertation argues that the current civil war, which started
with the Ḥūthī takeover of Ṣan‘ā’ in early 2015 and the Saudi air campaign in March of that
year, is an attempt to deal with the unfinished business of the 1960s civil war. What was not
solved then, is being settled now. Yemen never fully answered what it meant for Zaydīs to
practice in the absence of an imām. The current civil war is an attempt to solve militarily what
the country has been unable to answer politically.

This dissertation has conducted its micro-survey of Yemeni history in the twentieth
century in three parts. Part I dealt with the rise and fall of the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty of Yemen.
Part II showed the eclipse of the imāmate during the civil war of the 1960s. Part III showed the
many ways in which a Republican government in Ṣan‘ā’ attempted to eliminate traditional
Zaydism as a political force and the repercussions of that overreach.

The argument put forward in Part I suggests that the early part of the twentieth century,
particularly immediately after World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, represented
a rare window in time in which some foreign technologies, primarily the telegraph, were utilized
in Yemen by Yahyā to exercise greater control over the hinterlands than his predecessors had
ever been able. At the same time, he constrained the introduction of other means of foreign
influence. This meant that Yemen both benefitted from technological advancements while
remaining relatively isolated. This is not to say, of course, that there was no outside influence,
merely that these outside influences, such as nationalism, took longer to penetrate Yemen than
outside technologies. Part of this was a deliberate decision on the part of Imām Yahyā, whose
skills as a local politician were matched by his suspicion of foreign, non-Zaydī ideologies. It was
not until the end of Imām Yaḥyā’s reign in the late 1930s and 1940s that a local opposition,
headed by both intellectuals influenced by wider trends in the Arab world and military officers who had trained abroad, started to appear in Yemen. Unlike later iterations of domestic opposition movements, this earliest, and relatively loose group of like-minded individuals, was not interested in overthrowing the imamate. Indeed, many of the key leaders, such as Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Zubayrī, were Zaydīs themselves. Instead, they wanted to correct and re-orient the imamate – not overthrow it – particularly by loosening the stranglehold that the Ḥamīd al-Dīns under Yaḥyā had on the office.

Two particular decisions stand out in this regard. First, Yaḥyā’s decision to designate his son, Aḥmad, as walī al-‘ahd, or crown prince, circumventing the traditional Zaydī practice of allowing the best candidate to put themselves forward. The second, and a related decision, came when Yaḥyā accepted the use of the word “kingdom” (mamlaka) to describe Yemen. To be sure there had been hereditary monarchies in Yemen previously. Most notably, the Qasimī dynasty of the eighteenth century institutionalized and formalized the transfer of power from, typically, father to son. But this was subsequently viewed as an aberration and in contradiction to the teachings and traditions of Zaydism. Yaḥyā’s decision to consolidate power within his own family came at a time of increased nationalism in the region, which had started to seep into Yemen, carried back by scholars studying in Cairo or military officers training in Baghdad. Still, the 1948 coup did not seek to overthrow the imāmate but rather to reform it from what Yaḥyā’s opponents saw as the excesses of the Ḥamīd al-Dīns. In this case, two strands of opposition – Yaḥyā’s personal opponents whom he had long-running feuds with and more traditional scholars who wanted to reform the institution of the imāmate – came together. This would not be the case

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the next time. In 1962, a second major coup sought to abolish the imāmate completely in favor of an Egyptian-style Republic.

Like his father, Aḥmad also used modern technology – again the telegraph but also airplanes and motor vehicles – to consolidate his grip on power, particularly in some of the hinterlands that had traditionally been largely beyond the reach of the imam in Ṣan‘ā’. However, unlike Yaḥyā, Aḥmad could not count on Yemen’s continued isolation in the years after the end of World War II. The foreign influences that had lagged behind the foreign technology in the 1930s and 1940s appeared with force in the 1950s and 1960s. Aḥmad also had to deal with the issue of hereditary succession. But there was a key difference. In the 1940s, while some Zaydī scholars bristled at the way Yaḥyā forced them to support Aḥmed first as crown prince and later as imām, few could disagree that Aḥmad was actually qualified. This was not the case with Aḥmad’s own son, Muḥammad al-Badr, whom few felt possessed the necessary requirements to be imām.

Part II focuses on the eight-year civil war from 1962 – 1970, and is the pivot point of modern Yemeni history. The point at which the imamate was overthrown for a republic and the Zaydī sayyids went from the top of the pyramid to the bottom, from a position of power to one of state-sanctioned abuse. As if to make this distinction from pre-1962 imamic Yemen to post-1962 republican Yemen as clear as possible the first president of the Republic, ‘Abdullāh al-Sallāl, came from a butcher family, which was traditionally seen as “unclean,” meaning that someone Zaydī sayyids would not allow their daughters to marry now headed the state of which they were a part.

Part III concludes this micro history of Yemen’s twentieth century, taking the reader through the Arab Spring, Ṣāliḥ’s forced resignation, and the Ḣūthīs’ control of Yemen’s capital.
In March 2015, Saudi Arabia, fearing growing Iranian influence on its southern border, launched an air war, which continues to this day. This Saudi-led war forced the Ḥūthīs and Ṣāliḥ, two old enemies, into an alliance of convenience. To many outside observers, including policy makers in region as well as the west, the rise of the Ḥūthīs and their recent alliance with a one-time enemy has been inexplicable and confusing. That, as this dissertation makes clear, should not be the case. The current conflict, while undoubtedly impacted by contemporary geo-political concerns and developments, has its roots in the unfinished business of the civil war of the 1960s, the pivot point of Yemen’s modern history.
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