

# Yemen's War Reaches Into Public-University Classrooms

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The battle for the Yemeni port of Hodeidah has brought the country's war into the international spotlight recently, because the port is the main entry point for humanitarian aid. But little international attention has been given to how Yemen's civil war has affected the country's public universities.

During the academic year that has just ended, one of the two major sides in the conflict—the Iranian-supported Houthi movement—expanded its authority in areas it holds militarily by replacing experienced professors and university administrators with unqualified political loyalists. The Houthis have also forced ideologically oriented changes to the curriculum, according to interviews with academics and others inside and outside the country.

“Thousands of professors—who embody the nation's conscience and intellect—are suffering not only the non-payment of their salaries, but are under siege by the Houthis,” said Abd al-Rahman al-Shami, a professor at Sana'a University, the country's largest public university.

Commenting on developments at Sana'a University, Waleed F. Mahdi, an associate professor at the University of Oklahoma in the United States, wrote in an e-mail message that “there is no doubt that the Houthis are in full control of Sana'a. They have solidified their absolute

control of the scene, especially since the death of the late president Saleh [in December 2017], through intimidation, torture, imprisonment, and kidnapping. The state of emergency, which the Houthis declared for the sake of ‘fighting the Saudis,’ has transcended rhetoric and led to policies and procedures that prohibit any serious lines of critique, or even demands for peace.”

The Houthi policies create further difficulties for public universities that have already suffered greatly as a result of the war in the poorest country of the Middle East. A 2017 study by an education professor found that a dozen university buildings had been destroyed and 25 had been seriously damaged in the conflict. (*See a related article, “Yemen, Chaos, War and Higher Education.”*)

Analysts say that the Saudi-led alliance fighting the Houthis is by no means blameless in the destruction of the country, and human-rights group say they have documented alliance bombings of numerous civilian targets, including health centers and schools. Houthi supporters say the movement is fighting because of legitimate grievances over unequal distribution of resources and power within Yemen, and that the war cannot be oversimplified into a regional Shia-Sunni conflict.

Oussama Abdullah, a professor of management at Sana’a University, said the Houthi authorities had demanded university jobs for members of their extended kinship group, which originates in northern Yemen and whose members belong to the Zaidi tradition of Shia Islam. The appointments weren’t limited to Sana’a University, but also included positions at Tamar, Ibb and Hodeidah universities, among others, he said.

In February, students of the business-studies faculty at Sana’a University held demonstrations to protest the Houthi action. Ammar, a student leader who did not want his full name published, said students would continue to oppose “these catastrophic interferences which threaten the educational integrity of Sana’a University.”

When Sana’a University professors went on strike to demand wages that had not been paid for more than a year, Houthi officials fired the striking professors and replaced them with new teachers, many of whom did not even hold a master’s degree, professors at the university told Al-Fanar Media.

Earlier in the year, a Houthi official, Hamza al-Houthi, announced that universities in Houthi-held areas would be required to teach a course based on the political outlook of the group’s leader, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi. According to Houthi views, Yemen is part of a Shia Muslim political bloc led by Iran which is at war with a Sunni Muslim political bloc led by Saudi Arabia.

Mohsen al-Maidan, a student activist in the business-studies faculty at Sana’a University, described the course as “mere political trading.” “Those who teach this course were appointed by the Houthis, and are not specialised in teaching,” he said.

Abd al-Rahim Ahmad, a professor at Sana'a University, said the Houthi goal was to replace an existing course in Islamic culture with one that reflected Zaidi religion and culture. "I am not defending the Islamic culture course, but it is better than what the Houthis want to teach," he said. "The concept of Islamic culture is a concept of moderation and not one of extremism. The Houthis wouldn't fail to find teachers for this course, as there are many cultivated teachers who would be qualified to teach it."

Murad Alazzany, a professor of English at Sana'a University, said the Islamic studies course was a less important issue than the non-payment of salaries. "Many lecturers have left the country," he said. "Some have gone to Gulf countries, and some have gone to work for international organizations." He estimated that about 300 professors had either been fired or left the university voluntarily, while about 800 remain. "Some professors are loyal to the Houthis, and some are disappointed, but there is nothing they can do about it," he said.

Alazzany said that all other courses have been unaffected by the Houthi presence. "For the [Houthi] militias, the most important thing is to control the universities by putting their loyalists in significant positions: the deans and rectors," he said.

Alazzany said that the Houthis had also demanded the introduction of a course in the Persian language at Sana'a University—"not because it's a beautiful language, but because it's a political language," he said.

Mahdi, the professor at the University of Oklahoma, said that "aside from the alleged administrative abuses regarding faculty hires, it is clear that the culture of fear produced through the Houthis' strict rule would naturally lead many faculty [members] to self-sensor the content of their courses."

"This, in my opinion," he said, "is the ultimate threat to the enlightenment nature of higher education."

*A local Yemeni journalist, who did not want his or her name to be published, contributed reporting to this article.*