Yemen

Ethnicity in Yemen

Group selection

We identify varying politically relevant ethnic groups in different time periods.

Note: Until 1990, Yemen was separated into the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). The coding periods prior to 1990 only relate to the northern Yemen Arab Republic (for South Yemen in this period, see Yemen People's Republic).

Power relations

1946-1949 and 1950-1962

The majority of the population of North Yemen were **Sunni Shafi'i Arabs**, especially at the coast and the center (they also lived in South Yemen). It is reported that the Shafi'i group represented approximately 70% of the total population and the remaining 30% were **Shi'a Zaydis**. Before 1962, North Yemen was a theocratic Imamat run by a Zaydi Imam ([4741]). A succession of Zaydi Imams had established themselves since the 10th century in the mountainous northern part of Yemen, "acting as arbitrators between tribes and thereby acquiring both a religious following and secular ascendancy" ([4742]). The Shi'a Zaydis are therefore coded Dominant during this period and the Sunni Shafi'i as Powerless.

[4741] [Central Intelligence Agency, 2017]

[4742] [Minority Rights Group International, 2017]

The **Jewish** population became social and political pariahs at the beginning of the 19th century. Yemeni Jews were scattered throughout the country with some concentration in the north, with no political representation. Therefore, they were coded Powerless. In 1949, the majority of Yemeni Jews migrated to Israel through Operation Magic Carpet (around 50,000). As a consequence, they became irrelevant as a political group in Yemen. (According to 2013 estimates, less than 0.1% of the total population in Yemen was Jewish.)

The Yemeni **Al-Akhdam** are a politically, socially, and economically excluded and exploited minority group. As the rest of the Yemeni population, they are Arabic speaking Muslims, but do not share membership with one of the main tribes of traditional Yemeni society. The most plausible explanation for their origin and history of isolation is that they are descendants of Ethiopian conquerors who were defeated in and expelled from Yemen around the sixth century ([4743]). Their group size is inconsistently reported. The

[4743] [IRIN News, 2012]

official government census in 2004 states their population size as
153,133 (0.01), while unofficial sources claim 500,000 - 3.5 million
persons self-identifying as Al-Akhdam (0.02 - 0.15) ([4744], 2). The
Al-Akhdam live geographically scattered across the country, mainly
in the outskirts of major cities. While they are not discriminated by
law, discrimination against them has permeated the entire Yemeni
system, including administrative structures and local and traditional
authorities. As a result, they have found themselves either denied ac-
cess to many rights – including civil and political rights – or without
the ability or awareness to access their rights ([4745]. Based on this
assessment, they are coded Discriminated.

1963-1990

The imamate itself was overthrown in 1962 and North Yemen was
subsequently ruled by military elites who belonged to the Zaydi
Hashid tribe. The Zaydi were divided into two tribal confederations,
Hashid and Bakil, who were the dominant political powers in this
period. Reportedly, **Shi'a Zaydis** relations with **Sunni Shafi'i
Arabs** tended to be free of difficulty ([4746]). However, due to their
strong political influence, the Zaydi are coded Senior Partner after
1962. The Sunni Shafi'i, generally better educated than the rest,
were more dominant in the business sector and also held important
posts in the civil service. They are coded as Junior Partner after
1962. The status of the **Al-Akhdam** remained unchanged.

1991-1994

In 1990, North and South united and became the sovereign Republic
of Yemen ([4747], 295). The population of the new state was made up
by the Shiite Zaydis, mainly native to the northern and northwestern
part of the united country and the Sunni Shafi'is, mainly living in
the south and the southeast ([4748]). However, religious-ethnic affili-
ations did not play a predominant role in the government building
process. Here, rivalries "were largely based on the old north-south
division" ([4749], 873). Following a national referendum on the con-
stitution in 1991, the first national multi-party elections were held
in 1993 ([4750], 2). The electoral innovations of the early 1990s did
not challenge or undermine the existing tribal structures and their
inequalities. In the delineation of the 301 constituencies, state and
tribal geo-political conceptions remained congruent. The new con-
stitution gave equal powers to Northerners and Southerners ([4751],
3). Therefore, the relevant political groups in this period simply
pose the **Northerners** and the **Southerners** who were given equal
power and are therefore both coded as Senior Partners. According
to Dresch ([4752], 186), the South had a population of about 2.5 mio
(18%) and the North about 11 mio (81%) at the time. These group
sizes were referred to in the coding, whereas the **Al-Akhdam** still
made up 1% of the total population. Their political status remained
unchanged.

1995-2015

A short Civil War in 1994 altered the power relations, transforming a democratic partnership into authoritarian northern-dominated rule ([4753], 3). The **Southern Shafi'i** reportedly supported the **Northern Shafi'i** during the conflict. The **Northern Zaydi** were politically better organized under incumbent President Ali Abdallah Saleh. Southern leaders temporarily seceded and declared the Democratic Republic of Yemen. However, it was never internationally recognized and President Saleh resumed control over all of Yemen quickly. These events lead to the new coding period after the Civil War, which distinguishes not only between Northerners and Southerners, but differentiates the groups according to their religious denomination as well. This overall picture was confirmed in the elections of 1997 and 2003 ([4754], 306). Still, both the **Southern and Northern Shafi'i** had enough weight and influence in the executive to call them Junior Partners, while the **Northern Zaydis** were coded as Senior Partner. The situation of the **Al-Akhdam** remained unchanged.

Although the coding for the ethnic groups remained constant, several political developments influenced the power balances in the following years: In 2004, Zaydi cleric Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houthi launched a rebellion against the Yemeni government in Saada, in an attempt to reestablish Zaydi dominance in the north and contest newly-unified Yemen's policies of cooperation with the GPC regime. Al-Houthi was killed by government forces, and the rebellion was continued under his son's leadership. The Houthi had a long history of Zaydi cultural advocacy, but officially distinguished themselves under the name Houthi following al-Houthi's assassination. They were a group "difficult to definitively characterize as military, religious, or political in nature" ([4755]) and were classified by some as a political movement ([4756]) or as an ethnic group with strong Zaydi Shiite support. Others classifed the group as inherently religious, not political, and a reaction to increasing Salafi presence in Zaydi-dominated Saada. Here, the Houthi are considered a political faction of the Zaydis and not distinguished formally in the coding. The Houthi were mostly active in Saada and Amran provinces of northern Yemen, and controlled the northern Saada governorate and surrounding pockets. Their grievances included economic and social marginalization, governmental corruption, alignment of the state with the US and Saudi Arabia, as well as excessive Wahhabi influence on state policy and schools ([4757]). In religious regards, they believe that only descendants of the Prophet can be rulers of the state, and thus did not recognize President Saleh as a legitimate ruler, despite him also being a Zaydi. The Houthi claimed to seek autonomy from the Yemeni state for the Zaydi Shiite population ([4758]). However, government officials argued that the conflict was actually rooted in a class struggle between the modern Zaydis (such as Saleh) and their traditional counterparts (Houthi) ([4759]).

[4753] [Wedeen, 2008]

[4754] [Weir, 2007]

[4755] [Islamopedia Online, 2012]
[4756] [Zimmerman Harnisch, 2010]

[4757] [Zimmerman Harnisch, 2010]

[4758] [Zimmerman Harnisch, 2010]

[4759] [Zimmerman Harnisch, 2010]

Between 2004-2010, the Saada Wars took place, an armed conflict between the Houthi and the central government, displacing some 300,000 people. Essentially, the conflict was a "power struggle between federal and local actors" ([4760]). The conflict became somewhat inter-tribal with the inclusion of several tribes into government forces. Prior to 2007, long-term violence in Yemen was dominated by inter-group, ethnic and religious violence, and incidences of violence were related to the groups' geographical compositions ([4761]). From 2007 onwards, the nature of violence in Yemen evolved from being ethnically and religiously-based, to also being driven by the economic effect of global increases in food prices in 2007 on an already impoverished population ([4762]).

In 2011, a revolution resulted in a violent power struggle between supporters of Ali Abdullah's Saleh's regime, who had been in power over the last three decades, and those who opposed him, mainly the Houthi ([4763]). After a call to end the violence by the UN Security Council, Saleh officially transferred his powers to Vice-President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi in February 2012. Hadi was to oversee a transition to a democratic political system following the revolution. The Houthi boycotted the one-party elections and took control of al-Jawf governorate and travel routes surrounding Sanaa. Reconciliation attempts failed and tensions and violence continued between Shafi'i, Houthi, and other civilian actors, particularly those displaced by the conflict.

2016-2017

The conflict in Yemen continued during this period and several reports stressed the complexity of the underlying agendas. There is reportedly "a risk is that [. . .] 'sectarianism' will be used as an explanation for the complex set of internal conflicts" ([4764]). The Houthi, now allied with former supporters of ousted president Saleh, took control of much of Yemen's territory, especially the northwestern part ([4765]). In 2015, these allies took over the capital Sanaa and declared the constitution void ([4766]). The internationally recognized president Hadi was ousted in the same year and fled to Saudi Arabia ([4767]). Saudi involvement in Yemeni politics dated back several decades and religious affiliations can hardly be seen as the main driver ([4768]). It seemed that the traditional fault line between north and south was growing again ([4769]), with a temporal dominance of the Northern Zaydi group. This indicates a shift back to the power relations of the period 1990-1994. However, due to the increasing informality of government rule and the complicated situation of political alliances, it was decided to stick to the status quo, where **Northern Zaydis** – to whom both Houthi and Hadi are affiliated – are coded as Senior Partners and **Southern Shafi'i** as Junior Partners. (Even though it cannot be talked of formal regional autonomy, the power bases are to be differentiated rather in geographical terms than in a general power-sharing government as it was introduced in

[4760] [Salmoni, 2010]

[4761] [Gros et al., 2012]

[4762] [Gros et al., 2012]

[4763] [Ferguson, 2012]

[4764] [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

[4765] [Salisbury, 2017]

[4766] [US Department of State, 2016]

[4767] [Salisbury, 2017]

[4768] [Phillips, 2014]

1990.) The only suggested change in coding is that the **Northern Shafi'i** become Powerless, as the northern territories are described as being fully controlled by the Houthi as of 2016 ([4770]).

The **Al-Akhdam**, who are often referred to as "Muhammashin", are still discriminated against and their organizations are reportedly at risk of being used by political factions ([4771]). Nevertheless, in 2013 measures to protect the rights of this minority group and to ban discrimination against them were announced, but it is not known whether any of the proposed measures were implemented. The NDC had one delegate (out of 565 in total) representing the Al-Akhdam ([4772]). This representation was a first for the community, however with the ongoing conflict it did not significantly improve their situation. Therefore, their coding remained Discriminated.

[4771] [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

[4772] [US Department of State, 2016]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Yemen

From 1946 until 1949

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Shafi'i (Arab)	0.69	POWERLESS
Zaydis	0.29	DOMINANT
Jewish	0.01	POWERLESS
Al-Akhdam	0.01	DISCRIMINATED

From 1950 until 1962

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Shafi'i (Arab)	0.7	POWERLESS
Zaydis	0.29	DOMINANT
Al-Akhdam	0.01	DISCRIMINATED

From 1963 until 1990

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Shafi'i (Arab)	0.7	JUNIOR PARTNER
Zaydis	0.29	SENIOR PARTNER
Al-Akhdam	0.01	DISCRIMINATED

From 1991 until 1994

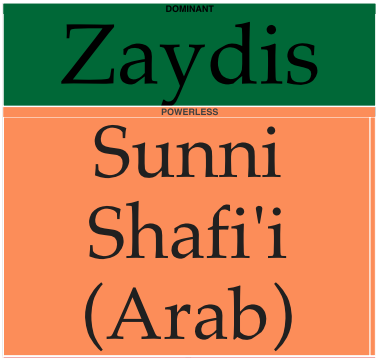| Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Northerners	0.81	SENIOR PARTNER
Southerners	0.18	SENIOR PARTNER
Al-Akhdam	0.01	DISCRIMINATED

Figure 999: Political status of ethnic groups in Yemen during 1946-1949.
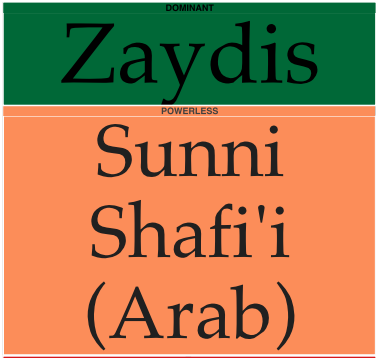

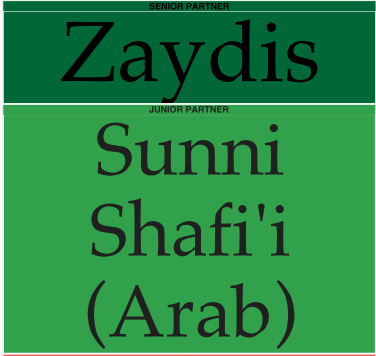Figure 1000: Political status of ethnic groups in Yemen during 1950-1962.

Figure 1001: Political status of ethnic groups in Yemen during 1963-1990.

From 1995 until 2015

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Northern Shafi'i	0.49	JUNIOR PARTNER
Northern Zaydis	0.32	SENIOR PARTNER
Southern Shafi'i	0.18	JUNIOR PARTNER
Al-Akhdam	0.01	DISCRIMINATED

From 2016 until 2017

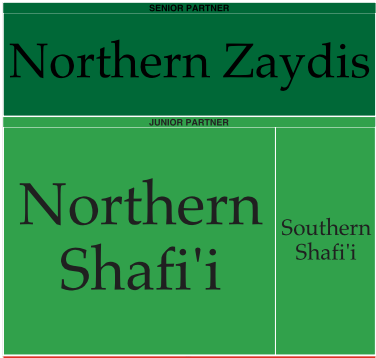| Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Northern Shafi'i	0.49	POWERLESS
Northern Zaydis	0.32	SENIOR PARTNER
Southern Shafi'i	0.18	JUNIOR PARTNER
Al-Akhdam	0.01	DISCRIMINATED

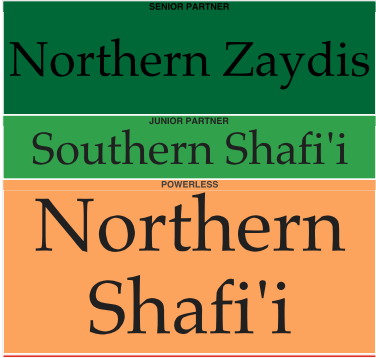Figure 1003: Political status of ethnic groups in Yemen during 1995-2015.

Figure 1004: Political status of ethnic groups in Yemen during 2016-2017.

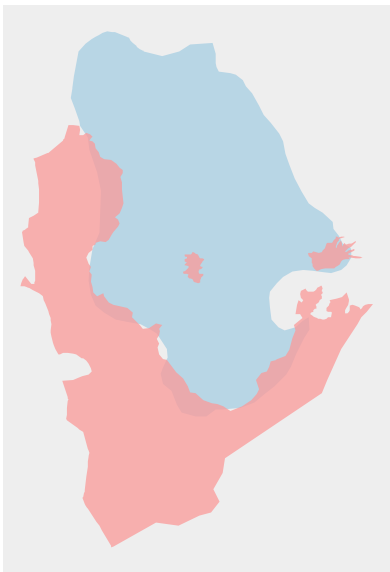# Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Yemen

From 1946 until 1949

Figure 1005: Map of ethnic groups in Yemen during 1946-1949.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
	Zaydis	62 104	Regionally based
	Sunni Shafi'i (Arab)	47 089	Regionally based
	Al-Akhdam		Urban
	Jewish		Urban

Table 340: List of ethnic groups in Yemen during 1946-1949.
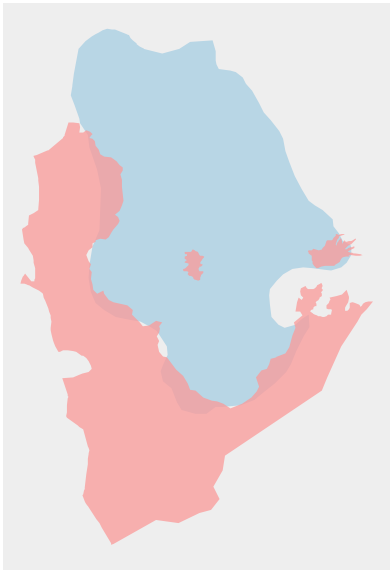
From 1950 until 1989

Figure 1006: Map of ethnic groups in Yemen during 1950-1989.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
■	Zaydis	62 104	Regionally based
■	Sunni Shafi'i (Arab)	47 089	Regionally based
	Al-Akhdam		Urban

Table 341: List of ethnic groups in Yemen during 1950-1989.

From 1990 until 1990
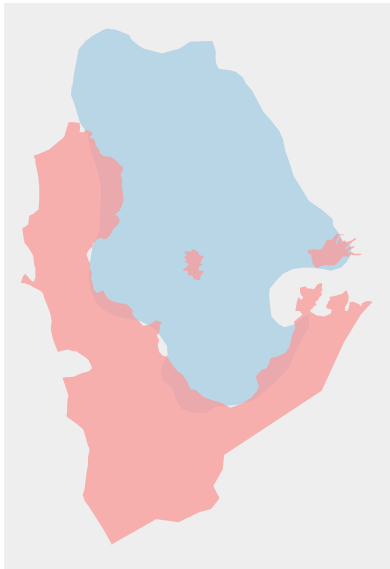
Figure 1007: Map of ethnic groups in Yemen during 1990-1990.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
■	Zaydis	62 104	Regionally based
■	Sunni Shafi'i (Arab)	47 121	Regionally based
	Al-Akhdam		Urban

Table 342: List of ethnic groups in Yemen during 1990-1990.
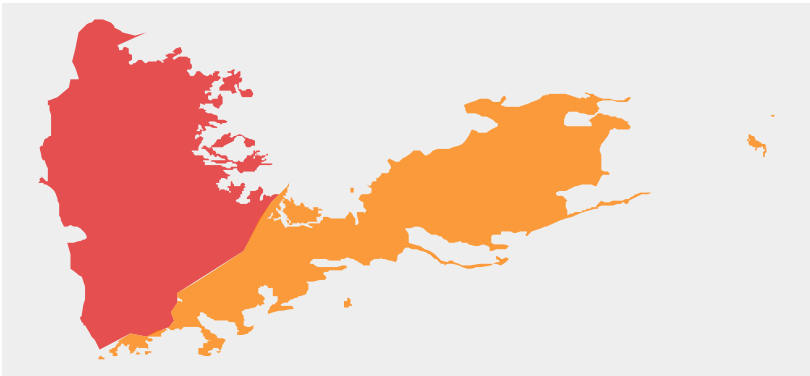
From 1991 until 1994

Figure 1008: Map of ethnic groups in
Yemen during 1991-1994.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
🟥	Northerners	98 056	Regionally based
🟧	Southerners	85 234	Regionally based
	Al-Akhdam		Urban

Table 343: List of ethnic groups in
Yemen during 1991-1994.
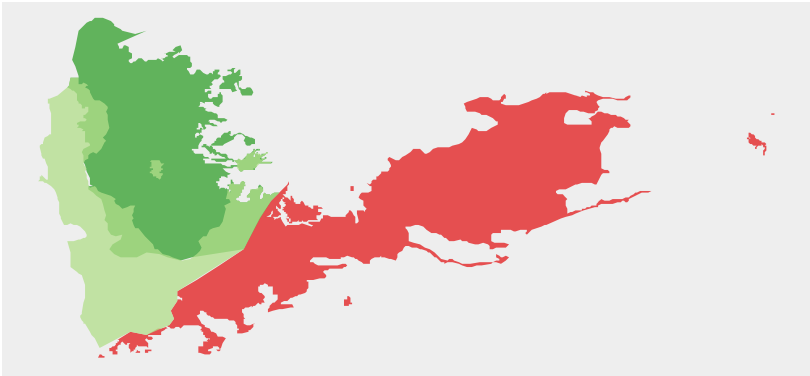
From 1995 until 1999

Figure 1009: Map of ethnic groups in
Yemen during 1995-1999.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
🟥	Southern Shafi'i	85 234	Regionally based
🟩	Northern Zaydis	65 189	Regionally based
🟩	Northern Shafi'i	47 121	Regionally based
	Al-Akhdam		Urban

Table 344: List of ethnic groups in
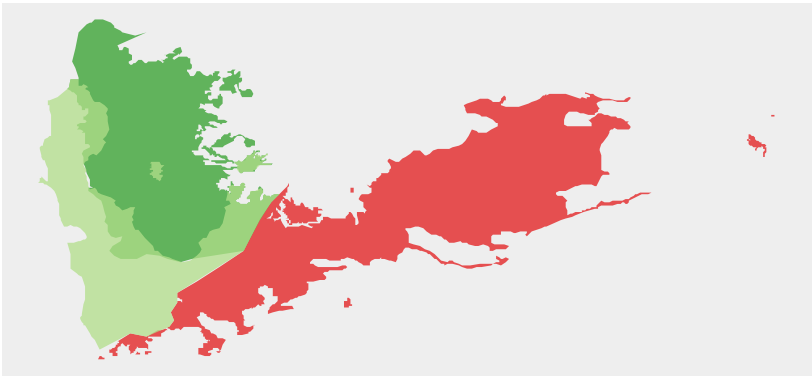Yemen during 1995-1999.

From 2000 until 2000

Figure 1010: Map of ethnic groups in Yemen during 2000-2000.

	Group name	Area in km²	Type
🟥	Southern Shafi'i	85 234	Regionally based
🟩	Northern Zaydis	65 189	Regionally based
🟩	Northern Shafi'i	47 121	Regionally based
	Al-Akhdam		Urban

Table 345: List of ethnic groups in Yemen during 2000-2000.

From 2001 until 2017
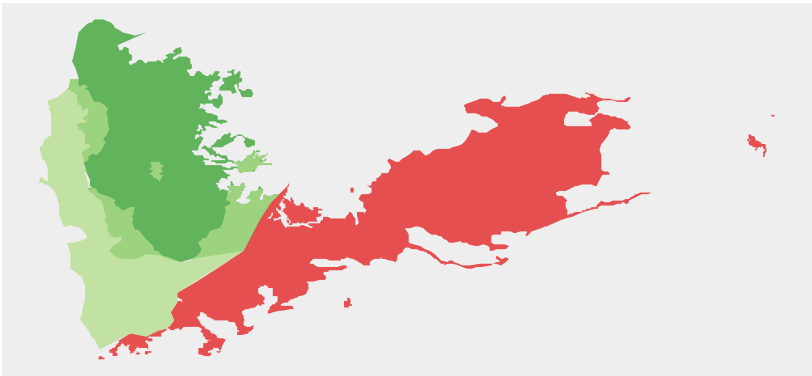
Figure 1011: Map of ethnic groups in Yemen during 2001-2017.

	Group name	Area in km²	Type
🟥	Southern Shafi'i	85 234	Regionally based
🟩	Northern Zaydis	65 189	Regionally based
🟩	Northern Shafi'i	47 121	Regionally based
	Al-Akhdam		Urban

Table 346: List of ethnic groups in Yemen during 2001-2017.

Conflicts in Yemen

Starting on 1948-03-14

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Yemen (North Yemen)	Opposition coalition		1948-03-14			
Government of Yemen (North Yemen)	Royalists	Northerners	1962-10-30	Explicit	No	No
Government of Yemen (North Yemen)	NDF	Sunni Shafi'i (Arab)	1979-03-30	Presumed	Yes	Yes
Government of Yemen (North Yemen)	AQAP	Sunni Shafi'i (Arab)	2009-11-02	No	Yes, from EGIP	No
Government of Yemen (North Yemen)	AQAP	Southerners	2009-11-02	No	Yes, from EGIP	No
Government of Yemen (North Yemen)	Ansarallah	Northern Zaydis	2014-03-12	Explicit	Yes, from EGIP	Split
Government of Yemen (North Yemen)	Forces of Hadi		2015-03-06			

Starting on 1972-02-20

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of South Yemen	Government of Yemen (North Yemen)		1972-02-20			

Starting on 1994-02-20

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Yemen (North Yemen)	Democratic Republic of Yemen	Southerners	1994-02-20	Explicit	Yes	No

Starting on 2015-03-19

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Yemen (North Yemen)	IS	Southern Shafi'i	2015-03-19	Explicit	Yes	No
Government of Yemen (North Yemen)	IS	Northern Shafi'i	2015-03-19	Explicit	Yes	No