**­­ Muslim Hunger Strikes as Secular Critique in Yemen**

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Abstract: The growing internationalism of armed conflict in Yemen has presented challenges to Muslim reformers working to achieve social justice. This paper attends to the ethical dimensions of Islamic activism by exploring the use of hunger strikes to strengthen otherwise fractious political coalitions. Facing pressure from actors willing to evoke the most strident forms of sectarianism to explain, license and justify violence, hunger strikers and their supporters enlist what Abdulrabbuh al-Rubaidi (2018) has called a “new skepticism” toward conventional religious establishments that, for many Yemenis since 2011 especially, have become complicit with authoritarian oppression. With the aim of identifying new currents in Muslim reform across the Global South as sovereign state formations face unprecedented scrutiny, this paper considers hunger strike activists’ turn to what political theorist Achille Mbembé (2019 [2003]) has called “the necropolitical.” In drawing attention to the relationship between hungry bodies and forms of living death exacted on populations through regimes of national and parastatal violence, Yemeni activists hail the value of older, anti-imperialist discourses for reconstituting Islamic solidarity. The ethical leverage of such activism inheres, it is argued, in manifestations of “the secular,” understood not as something opposed to, or outside of, religion but, following anthropologist Khaled Furani (2015), as a recognition of finitude whose sensory dimensions, magnified against frailties of sovereignty, knowledge and certitude, guide believers toward otherwise unavailable modes of religious worldliness. Islamic fasting rituals help activists frame and stage finitude. Conducted in ordinary and domestic spaces and coordinated with hunger strikes, in practice as well as through literary and artistic representation, fasting rituals situate hunger strike activism as an exercise in Muslim sovereignty tethered to virtuous self-fashioning. This paper attends, in particular, to the role of autobiographical memoires in helping activists link fasting to traditions of Islamic mourning. Narratives of struggling, hungry bodies and their collective mobilization magnify the costs of liberal binaries between the state and the citizen-subject, the public and the private, politics and religion that are so intrinsic to the international system. Opportunities for solidarity emerge when dissent through fasting offers to upend norms of religious identity, authority, law and community that are held to be unjust and oppressive.

Keywords: Yemen, Islam, secularism, fasting, necropolitics, hunger strikes

**Muslim Hunger Strikes as Secular Critique in Yemen**

The internationalism of armed conflict in Yemen has presented challenges to Muslim reformers working to achieve social justice.[[1]](#footnote-1) This paper attends to the ethical dimensions of Islamic activism by exploring the use of hunger strikes to strengthen otherwise fractious political coalitions. Facing pressure from actors willing to evoke the most strident forms of sectarianism to justify violence, many hunger strikers and their supporters enlist what Abdulsalam al-Rubaidi (2018) has called a “new skepticism” toward conventional religious establishments that, since wide-spread protests in 2011 especially, have become complicit with authoritarian oppression. According to a 2017 survey by the Yemeni Polling Center, roughly one in six Yemenis in the country’s populated midlands view the activity of “religious groups” in mostly negative terms, an average that climbs to a quarter in some governorates.[[2]](#footnote-2) Frustration with state responses to Sunni militant groups such as al-Qaʿida and the Islamic State climbs to 60-85% in some regions. With the aim of identifying new currents in Muslim reform across the Global South as sovereign state formations face unprecedented scrutiny, this paper considers hunger strike activists’ turn to what political theorist Achille Mbembé (2019 [2003]) has called “the necropolitical.” By drawing attention to the relationship between hungry bodies and forms of living death exacted on populations though regimes of national and parastatal violence, Yemeni activists are rediscovering the value of older anti-imperialist discourses for reconstituting Islamic solidarity. The ethical leverage of such activism inheres, it is argued, in manifestations of “the secular,” understood not as something opposed to, or outside of, religion but, following anthropologist Khaled Furani (2015), as a recognition of finitude whose sensory dimensions, magnified against frailties of sovereignty, knowledge and certitude, guide believers toward otherwise unavailable modes of religious worldliness.

The focus here is on Yemen’s May 20th movement, founded in northern Yemen in 2017 with the goal of securing salaries and pensions, unpaid for over six months, for roughly two-hundred thousand state workers. Led by Ahmed Saif Hashed, a parliamentarian whose advocacy for political reform gained national attention through his leadership during mass protests in 2011, the movement reached its apex during Hashed’s own fourteen-day hunger strike in the summer of 2017. Given that most May 20th activists have been from Yemen’s central and northern governorates, areas largely controlled by forces under the leadership of ʿAbd al-Malik al-Houthi since 2015, this paper offers insight into the resilience of the newly formed Zaidi-majority state in the face of extraordinary domestic and international opposition. Kamilia al-Eriani (2021) argues that the Houthis’ transition from political leaders to state actors “cannot be simply reduced to a process of ‘Islamicization’” but must be situated amidst practices of nation-state formation. “It is in this context of (secular) state formation,” she argues “that we should understand the Houthi attempts to assimilate and homogenize society by regulating and refashioning its religious and moral conduct in their own image.” In concert with al-Eriani, this paper investigates the ways leaders representing the northern Yemeni state seek to build credibility and win supporters by interpolating *sharīʿah* norms within the demands of newly regulated domestic spaces, effectively “secularizing” religion by making it more amenable to state surveillance and regulation. While al-Eriani turns to Talal Asad’s work to locate secular power in assertions of control over religious practices or forms of embodiment held to be threatening to the public order, this work privileges Furani’s approach to secularism in order to better account for the contingencies of state power, particularly when subject to transnational rituals of religious fasting whose cultural and political variations have long provided Muslims with means to reflect on competing claims of sovereignty. Even as a parliamentarian committed to the health of the state, Hashed joined other Yemenis in using the hunger strike to raise fundamental questions about the Houthi-led administration’s indebtedness to transnational forms of necropolitical violence exercised by neo-imperial powers across the Middle East and the Global South. Given the preponderance of socialist movements that gave shape to the politics of the modern hunger-strike during the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, May 20th activists animated a critique of state-sponsored religious ideology that highlighted continuities in predatory capitalism and accompanying logics of neoliberal securitization. Al-Eriani (2019) explores the affective work of mourning in contending claims to state sovereignty in Yemen. In attempts to counter post-2011 interventionist discourses that purport to save the state on the brink of its failure, Yemenis have turned to “alternative mode(s) of rethinking the Yemeni state as a community” (28). They have done so, she argues, “through mourning the *imagined* death of the weak state.” Where she focuses on song and poetry to document such necropolitical critique, here we attend to autobiographical memoires to highlight Islamic dimensions of mourning that allow Yemenis to build solidarity against norms of religious identity, authority, law and community that are held to be unjust and oppressive. Fasting rituals conducted in ordinary and domestic spaces – in practice as well as in literary and visual representation – re-imagine political activism through forms of Muslim sovereignty tethered to virtuous self-fashioning.

**The May 20th Movement**

Fed up with decades of state corruption and increasing belligerence under the rubric of Saudi-influenced Sunni salafism, northern Yemeni tribes rallying behind ʿAbd al-Malik al-Houthi seized power from Yemen’s transitional government in the fall of 2014. Regional powers reacted swiftly. Fearing a Shiʾa resurgence and keen to position themselves as allies, rather than foes, of anti-authoritarian sentiment across the Arab world, Sunni-majority neighbors across the Arabian Peninsula condemned the coup. From their perspective, national leadership under the mantle of Yemen’s historical Zaidi community would offer little resistance to the malign regional influence of Iran. Within two months, a Saudi-led military coalition began air and naval attacks with support from the United States and a retinue of private and paramilitary security firms. The war would inaugurate a period of chronic violence; within three years of the outbreak of the war, an estimated 85,000 children would die of starvation.[[3]](#footnote-3) By 2020, the United Nations identified Yemen as home to the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, with over 80% of the population in need of assistance and over one million suffering from the worst outbreak of cholera in modern history.

Despite the West’s focus on the Houthi regime’s illegitimacy, human rights violations and Iranian-backed religious zealotry, the northern government has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Amidst efforts to foment regime change spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the Houthis turned early on to the idea of fighting foreign imperialist aggressors to build alliances with a host of Muslim movements in the country. Upon seizing power in 2014, the Houthis worked to form a provisional new administration with Yemen’s Sunni-majority al-Hirak movement, the country’s largest southern separatist group. Although early negotiations with its longtime adversary, the Yemeni Reform Congregation (*al-Islāḥ*), the country’s largest modern Islamist party, proved short-lived, the Houthis established a “National Salvation Government” (*Ḥukūmat al-Inqādh al-Waṭanī)* two years later in the hopes of recruiting a broader range of Yemenis in southern and eastern regions. At the forefront of the effort were parliamentarians ʿAbd al-ʿAziz bin Habtur, former governor of Aden, and Ahmed Saif Hashed, both delegates of governorates nominally under the control of the southern, Saudi-backed government. Hashed’s campaign on behalf of state workers would eventually enlist the Minister of Industry and Commerce ʿAbduh Muhammad Bishr, a Zaidi parliamentarian widely known for representing Yemen in the world’s largest international body representing Muslims, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The success of the Houthi regime’s efforts to establish and maintain legitimacy has been severely tested by its ongoing failures to provide people with basic protections and services. Since their seizure of Sanaa in 2015, Yemenis have confronted an alarming rise in arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances, incarceration by militias, documented torture, degrading conditions of imprisonment, gender-based violence, the recruitment of children in conflict zones, the persecution of Baha’i religious minorities and otherwise marginalized social groups, the targeting of human rights activists, lawyers and journalists, the deterioration of Yemen’s justice system and the obstruction and prevention of access to humanitarian relief (Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2020). Given widespread and systemic abuses sanctioned or given reign by state powers and the ensuing challenges that mainstream religious groups in Houthi-controlled areas have had in mobilizing opposition to such practices, this paper focuses on the ethical purchase of hunger-strike activism by Hashed and other May 20th leaders as much as on their contribution to currents of religious reform that might be recruited by political actors for the purposes of state-building. Where ethics can be said to be cultivated through virtues involving “characteristic patterns of desire and motivation” (Williams 1985, 9), this paper pays close attention to Hashed’s autobiographical memoire, social media posts, and influence with respect to his own hunger strike. Lessons he draws about how one should live and what kind of person one should be come to matter not only individually but collectively; they are what Webb Keane (2016, 27) calls “ethical affordances” shaped by social connections, groups and “qualities of potentiality” that condition what personhood in a necropolitical system can be. While religions have long provided people with some of the most influential and elaborated ethical systems, monotheistic religions especially have emphasized a third-person, “God’s-eye view” that, according to Keane, tends to remove people from immediate contexts and put them into relation with a single, sovereign being. Ethics is a dimension of practical activity, accentuated more through social engagements in ordinary settings than through withdrawal into pious enclaves (ibid., 205). This paper's focus on instances of secular finitude provides a way to better understand the ethical leverage of weaponizing hunger insofar as struggles with and against material self-abnegation (*zuhd*) have long played central roles in defining what it means to be Muslim. Hunger strikers’ efforts to situate their protests in relation to traditions of religious fasting provide Yemenis with a vision of how to mobilize political and social change within authoritarian states without invoking predatory logics of intervention couched in the guises of liberal emancipation and humanitarianism.

In the spring of 2017, Yemeni parliamentarian Ahmed Hashed and colleagues issued set of demands to the Houthi-led administration that it pay salaries and pensions to state workers. As one of Yemen’s most prominent opposition leaders during Yemen’s “Arab Spring” protests in 2011, Hashed drew broad support in a campaign emphasizing a “popular struggle” (*niḍāl*) for workers’ rights based on principles of non-violence and a commitment to representative democracy.[[5]](#footnote-5) Although state corruption and systemic human rights abuse were central issues for Hashed and helped to underscore deeper problems with Houthi governance, Hashed made regular appeal to a deeper anti-imperial critique. Reiterating a manifesto issued in the prior year by Hashed’s own “National Salvation Party,” a precursor to the Houthis’ “government” under the same name, released in collaboration with a group called the Collective Revolutionary Leftist Flank, Hashed decried militarized interventions by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, all of which were said to extend the power of The Quartet – the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations – over affairs in the Middle East, especially in Palestine/Israel.[[6]](#footnote-6) On May 20th, 2017, during anniversary celebrations for unification between North and South Yemen in 1990, Hashed and supporters assembled outside Yemen’s parliamentary buildings in Sanaa. Focusing on salary and pension distributions for state workers, demonstrators linked their protest to condemnation of a UN-sponsored conference scheduled the following month to help facilitate “national dialogue.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Their call for justice, even if a human rights issue, did not signal a constitutional crisis. Yemenis had the moral and political mechanisms for addressing the country’s problems themselves.

The dilemma, for May 20th activists, was that, three months later, Houthi leaders continued to show no inclination to address their demands.[[8]](#footnote-8) New tactics were needed, ones that could build solidarity around political commitments holding the Houthi state to account. The movement’s focus on national unity, in particular, needed adjustment given the way in which Houthi leaders could turn this appeal against critics on the pretext of safeguarding Yemeni citizens. It was at this point that, on August 15, 2017, Ahmed Hashed began his hunger strike.

The use of hunger strikes by political activists in the Arab world has had a venerable history. For May 20th activists as well as other Yemenis who have employed this form of protest, its anchoring in anti-colonial struggles led by Arab socialists has been especially important. Palestinians’ “Battle of the Empty Stomachs,” launched by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine from Israel’s prisons in 1976, would become a rallying cry for May 20th supporters of Hashed, some of whom began sympathetic hunger strikes a few months later. Socialists and communists fighting authoritarian regimes in the wake of British withdrawal from Egypt in 1948 had inaugurated the Arab world’s use of hunger strikes, lending pan-Arab solidarity to the protests. In the decades that followed, hunger strike campaigns became a tool for solidarity based less on ethnic or nationalist grounds, however, than on the ambition to uphold universal principles of human rights, especially in the face of regional authoritarianism and neo-colonial threats from Western powers. Strikes included Arab-Americans protesting Israeli land annexation in the 1960s, Western Sahara activists protesting Morocco’s territorial annexation in 1975, Iranian migrants contesting their incarceration in the United States following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Turkish prisoners in 1996 and during the 2000s, incarcerated Muslims in Guantanamo Bay beginning in 2002, and a host of other groups and movements across North Africa and the Middle East following the Arab revolutions beginning in 2011.[[9]](#footnote-9) As anthropologist Susan Slyomoviks (2005, 12,191-192) has noted, individuals and organizations involved in human rights campaigns in these regions drew upon principles of international law, human rights and social justice broadly writ as much as they did conventional Islamist vocabularies, indeed all the more so as their efforts reached international audiences. For Muslim hunger strikers and their supporters, early role models included nineteenth-century female socialists in Russia as well as English suffragettes fighting against political and corporate abuse, Irish political prisoners struggling for republicanism beginning in the early 20th-century, and Mahatma Gandhi’s leadership in hunger strikes against British Raj from 1932 onward.

Hashed’s decision to strike fit well not only with this transnational legacy. His actions also tapped Yemenis’ collective memory of their own hunger strike activists. Shortly after North Yemen toppled the venerable Zaidi Mutawakkilite Imamate in 1962, southern Yemeni labor leaders, newly organized under the People’s Socialist Party formed in the same year, launched hunger strikes from Aden’s jails to protest deportation orders. After achieving independence from British rule in 1967, labor activists re-initiated the tactic, sometimes, though not always, from prison. In April 2008, a hunger strike was launched in Hashed’s own southern governorate of Lahej by thirty-four detainees protesting their incarceration at the Sabr Central Prison.[[10]](#footnote-10) Two years later, roughly thirty journalists of southern Yemen’s most prominent daily, *Al-Ayyam*, took up hunger strikes to protest the orchestrated campaign of intimidation and disappearances by the US and Saudi-backed regime of ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh.[[11]](#footnote-11) Hunger strikes by scores of detainees in Mukalla, in the eastern governorate of Hadramawt, followed that spring along with protests and killings across the country on a newly announced “Detainee Day.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Northern Yemen’s first recorded modern hunger strike occurred around the same time, in April 2010, this one by Hashed himself as leading member of Yemen’s Commission on Human Rights and Freedom; scores of his supporters would follow with a collective strike in July. Detainees in several northern Yemen jails would initiate their own strikes the following spring, approximately a year after mass demonstrations during Yemen’s “Arab Revolution” in early 2011. The number of prison strikes would escalate dramatically in the wake of the May 20th movement’s protests in 2017.[[13]](#footnote-13) However diverse the causes and tactics employed by strikers and their supporters, the coordinated and willful use of self-starvation – to continue, in most cases, until demands were met or else death – underscored the costs of what Achille Mbembé (2003 [2019]) has called “necropolitics.” In a world where some lives are valued more than others, whose political and economic structures depend upon, and help realize, the social insignificance of dying among certain communities and populations, taking death into one’s own hands could become, as Mbembe famously argued, one of the most effective ways to reject states’ claims to absolute sovereignty.[[14]](#footnote-14) As expressed by Yemeni hunger-striker Iman Saleh in 2021, “I am starving, but I am not *being* starved. I am suffering, but I can *choose* to end that suffering.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Where punishment of the most severe and ultimate kind could be wrested from those purportedly best suited to administer justice, the hunger strike could provide extraordinary ethical leverage to those otherwise considered powerless.

Scholarly studies of hunger strikes have a voluminous history. Much valuable work has been devoted to the ways in which prisoners, in particular, enact new forms of political agency as they confront racialized state power, whether in purportedly liberal democracies grappling with ongoing legacies of fascism and/or settler colonialism ((Beresford 1987; Mulcahy 1995; Hopkins 2016; Earle 2015; McGregor 2011; Hennessey 2014; Pfeifer 2018) or in authoritarian regimes across the Global South (Anderson 1983; Salgado 2017; Zhu and Chan 2001; Maerhofer 2017). With the exception of occasional studies of Catholic-majority Ireland (O'Keeffe 1984), especially by anthropologists (Feldman 1991; Sweeney 1993a; Sweeney 1993b), little of this work considers the role of religion in hunger strikes.[[16]](#footnote-16) In the Islamic world, the most thorough studies of hunger strikes, many of them by social scientists focusing on socialist and Leftist movements in Turkey (Bargu 2016; Koçan and Öncü 2006; Ateş and Korkmaz 2010), Israel/Palestine (Qouta, et al. 1997); Filc, et al. 2014); Al-Nashif Fall 2004/Spring 2005) and Guantànamo Bay (Pugliese 2016; Vicaro 2015), tend to sideline religiosity altogether. In what follows, we examine the ways in which Islamic rituals of fasting, in practice as well as in legal argumentation and literary representation, have helped activists translate the hunger strike into ethical discourses familiar to Yemenis. When brought to hunger strikes, disciplines of religious fasting become a site for creating solidarity through the secular.

**Fasting as Islamic Necropolitics**

As Hashed’s strike proceeded, supporters likened his actions to fasting for the benefit of the pious Muslim community (*ummah*). “May God be satisfied by his hunger and his victory against cave priests (*kahnat al-kuhuuf*)” intoned a supporter on his Facebook page at the time.[[17]](#footnote-17) Unlike a corrupt establishment of “cave priests,” conservative scholars who, like early Christians, preferred primitive isolation to pious sociality, Hashed is depicted as using hunger to advance Islam’s final triumph. For another supporter, Hashed followed in the footsteps of the eighth-century Muslim scholar Ahmed Ibn Hanbal, “As has been passed on from the Imam [Ahmed Ibn Hanbal]: ‘Excise and Your Lord will extend (*aḥdhaf wa rabbuka yakhlaf*).’” By depriving himself of the extraneous, Hashed invited God’s generosity, particularly in ensuring the righteous succession (*khilafah*) of pious leaders. On the eve of his tenth day striking, another supporter declared, “It’s settled. Fasting for ten days brings ample reward” (*Khalāṣ. Ṣawm al-ʿashr kamal al-ʾajr*). The expression referred to Islam’s supererogatory fast during the first third of Dhu al-Hijjah, the Islamic month when the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina takes place. According to a transmitted report (*ḥadīth*) attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, fasting on the final day of this period, called the Day of ʿArafah, results in the expiation of sins accumulated over the past year as well as those in the year to come.[[18]](#footnote-18) Although Hashed’s fast had occurred in an altogether different day and month, a traditional rite of religious fasting situated his strike ethically, inviting supporters to consider the ways in which Islam worked tropically to imbue original deeds, personages, spaces and times with contemporary meanings.

In citing transmitted reports, foundational Islamic cosmologies and the precedent of early Muslim scholars, May 20th supporters contributed to a hearty debate over the ethical merits and perils of hunger striking. Contemporary Muslim scholars and jurisconsults across the Arabian Peninsula have, more often than not, frowned on the practice. Extreme bodily deprivation is a form of self-harm and, in that respect, prohibited.[[19]](#footnote-19) As stated in the Qurʾan, critics note, “God wishes for your ease and not hardship” (*Sūrah of the Cow*, verse 185). Prolonged hunger strikes leading to systemic body failure or death are even more problematic given the venal sin of suicide in Islam: “Do not kill yourself" (*Sūrah of the Women*, verse 29). In condemning the use of hunger strikes, some scholars have attributed the practice to early non-Muslim polytheists; cueing audiences to the peril of more recent Western cultural influence, they lament its uptake by fellow co-religionists.[[20]](#footnote-20) Other scholars, including conservative salafis, argue that hunger strikes are allowable as long as they are of “short duration,” are directed toward a clear “oppressor,” and are designed to alleviate personal or collective pain and suffering, a situation that is most obvious for prisoners struggling against direct and systemic abuse.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Specific hunger-strike practices, policies and ethics have drawn an even wider range of responses from Muslim legal scholars. Given the importance of patient endurance (*ṣabr*) in Islam, so central to demonstrating faith in God’s plan, how might one initiate action against oppressors on behalf of the pious community? According to Saudi scholar ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Tarifi, imprisoned in 2016 for challenging state restrictions against religious police, hunger striking might be an allowable step toward addressing this question.[[22]](#footnote-22) Iranian scholar Mansour Leghaei has explored a different line of reasoning. If bodily suffering occasionally occurs when striving to follow God’s path, how much might be tolerable when devoted to saving one’s own life, or when helping others who face death or need saving from excruciating circumstances? Hunger strikes causing “serious harm to the body” might just clear the bar for what can be considered allowable.[[23]](#footnote-23) Moroccan scholar Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Fazazi ponders another dilemma: What if prisoners and their supporters have tried to address their plight through a range of more peaceable forms of *jihad* including protest, offering advice, contributing one’s wealth, and so forth, but are finally left with no other options?[[24]](#footnote-24) Can hunger strikes really be condemned, moreover, when strikers’ intentions are not made clear, either because prison authorities don’t release details of their actions or because the ultimate goals they pursue are matters of individual conscience? The latter question has been posed by Afghan Islamic scholar Mohammad Hashim Kamali.[[25]](#footnote-25) Strikers’ death-defying statements, after all, are as-yet-unrealized threats against oppressors as much as they are expressed intentions.

Alert to the problems with blanket condemnations of the practice, May 20th movement leaders joined Hashed’s followers and other Muslims across the world in relating hunger strikes to fasting, a ritual tradition that, according to Weismel-Manor (2005), has been hailed in support of hunger strike campaigns in multiple faith communities.[[26]](#footnote-26) In solidarity with Hashed just a few days after he secured modest concessions from the Houthi administration and decided to end his strike, two other May 20th leaders launched their own hunger strikes in the city of Taʿizz.[[27]](#footnote-27) Seeking to recruit others in similar acts of protest, Hassan al-Yasiri and ʿAdil al-ʿUqaibi, both labor activists, began their strike on the Festival of the Sacrifice (*ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā*), one of Islam’s holiest celebrations, held annually on the third day of the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) to Mecca and Madina. While others were feasting on lamb and assorted holiday dishes, in remembrance of Abraham’s offer to sacrifice Ishmael, scores of city employees along with their families committed themselves to a fast, performing their commitments publicly in locations across the city. “I will not enjoy holiday candy while my father is demonstrating in the street,” read a young woman’s handwritten sign, a photograph of which, taken on the steps of the Ministry of Education and Upbringing, later circulated on social media. Her sign reminded viewers of the ways in which counter-establishment fasting, however modest, could have ethical value when enacted in support of important political causes. “Reinstate my dad’s salary,” read the placard of a child bystander, “so that he can come back home.” More than any previous hunger-strike campaign in Yemen’s history, May 20th efforts in Taʿizz engaged entire families in public acts of ritual fasting that would be replicated in the years ahead.[[28]](#footnote-28) To coordinate events and help ensure safety, a Committee for the Sustained Supervision of the Procession of Empty Stomachs (*Al-Lajnat al-Ishrāfiyyah li-Masīrat al-Buṭūn al-Khāwiyyah*)) was established in the days that followed. Activists identified their struggle as a “Battle of the Empty Stomachs” (*Maʿrakat al-Amʿāʾ**al-Khāwiyyah*), in solidarity with Palestinian hunger-strikers in 1976 and more recently in 2012. Although the reinstatement of worker salaries and pensions, along with back-pay, remained paramount, their battle, like that of Palestinians, was part of a bigger war against neo-imperial oppression. The aggressors, in Yemen’s case, were not only corrupt Houthi officials but also Saudis, Gulf states and their Western agents, all backing illegitimate forces allied with Yemen’s southern government.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Strikers’ choice to fast on an Islamic day of feasting invites new questions about the ways the ethics of enacting a religious ritual might provide guidance in challenging religious convention. Typically, Muslim legal scholars view the practice as anathema. A sound transmitted report (*ḥadīth*) narrates that the Prophet Muhammad “forbade fasting on the Day of Breaking the Fast (*ʿĪd al-Fitr*) and the Day of Immolation (*Yawm al-Nahr*),” (another name for the Day of Sacrifice).[[30]](#footnote-30) Fasting on days leading up to these celebrations is highly meritorious: these include the last ten days of Ramadan and the first ten days of Dhu al-Hijjah respectively; for the Shiʾa celebration of ʿAshura, a commemoration focusing on the seventh-century martyrdom of ʿAli’s son Hussain and his supporters, the first ten days of the holy month of Muharram are also especially favorable. Maintaining one’s fast on days reserved for collective feasting, however, risks instigating dissension among Muslims (*fitnah*), a profound danger for the pious community and its leadership.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Inasmuch as Islamic law (*sharīʿah*) reflects orientation to living scripture as transmitted through centuries of moral reasoning and ethics, however, Muslims have much experience conjoining the imperatives of religious prescription to new or unusual circumstances requiring the reassessment of received norms. In his widely cited volume “Secrets of Fasting” (*Kitāb Asrār al-Ṣawm* [1992, 36]), for example, the 11th-century jurist and theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali explores the possibility of the “life-long fast” (*ṣawm al-dahr*). The method, he argues, can “depart from the established practice of the Prophet and make fasting a yoke for oneself even though God would like one to enjoy one’s liberties just as much as He would want one to fulfill one’s obligations.” This kind of fast includes maintaining one’s regime during the festivals both of Breaking the Fast (*ʿĪd al-Fitr*) and the Sacrifice (*ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā*). “If there are no dangers and the person deems it good for himself to observe a life-long fast,” al-Ghazzali writes, “let him by all means do so since several of the [Prophet’s] Companions and Followers have done the same.” According to a *ḥadīth* narrated by Abu Musa al-Ashʿari, “He who observes a life-long fast has no place in Hell, and will live to the ripe age of ninety” (37).

Fasting to the death to advance a cause is unaddressed by al-Ghazzali. Increasingly over the past decade, however, Muslims across the Middle East and North Africa have found reason to make similar exceptions to prohibition against fasting on Islam’s holiest feast-days.[[32]](#footnote-32) In a series of autobiographical essays penned in the wake of ongoing hunger-strike protests by unpaid state workers in Taʿizz in February 2020, Ahmed Hashed reflected on some of the religious and ethical benefits that he had discovered when restraining himself from the enjoyment of food, drink and merriment on Islam’s feast-days.[[33]](#footnote-33) In a world filled with death and suffering, whose abject cruelty was felt especially acutely by sheep each year as, on the Day of Sacrifice, they begin to see knives brandished about them and become steadily aware of an impending savagery, those who remain compassionate and attuned to the liberation of being (*wujūd*) are sure to find company with each other in a “life boat” that he likens to the act of prayer (*ṣalāh*). While the concept of *wujūd* has a venerable history in Sufism – a connection with God’s presence in all things found in many mystics’ writings – Hashed expands on the idea through an autobiographical narrative in which he recounts his own spiritual awakening. When, as a young boy, he confronted an abusive father whose dogmatism, authoritarianism and recourse to violence found uptake in a narrow-minded interpretation of Islamic law, Hashed tells of finding salvation in a prayer tradition that was taught to him by his mother’s sister. After his father allegedly punished him for failing to recite the Qurʾan’s opening *Sūrat* *Al-Fātiḥah* properly, citing a transmitted report (*ḥadīth*) in his defense, his aunt reassured him that setting aside the recitation of *sūrah*s when praying was perfectly fine as long as one constantly remembered God and uttered the profession of faith (*Shahādah*).[[34]](#footnote-34) In the final chapter of his five-part memoire, entitled “Poverty, Disgrace and an Unhappy Festival,” Hashed returns to his father’s abuse, especially on occasions of Islam’s holiest festival days, to elaborate on the religious, political and ethical lessons gained through his experience: “I refuse to die with a whimper. Though they would have my silence, as I stand before the oppressor, I will not be put to death through muzzling or strangulation... I shall spice my water with cloves and add contumacy to a salty life. How sweet is the stuff of creativity! How unparalleled its taste! Rebel against patriarchy when it threatens to nullify your very existence (*wujūd*), wresting away your being, according to its will… Liberate your noblest conscience (*maʿālī al-waʿī*) from the cistern of your own nurturing. Repudiate base platitudes taught to you at the primary school and university. Rebel against grand illusions that make you a dupe and cowering victim […] Never give in to those who would crush your being (*wujūduka*) out of existence.” Likening himself to a muzzled sheep on the Day of Sacrifice, Hashed stages his critique of sovereignty in Yemen through a necropolitical idiom that allows him to identify multiple sources of life-threatening authoritarian violence: his own father, Islamic fundamentalism, patriarchy, formal education when filled with “base platitudes” and “grand illusions,” indeed culture generally insofar as the “cistern of your own nurturing” can lead to “oppression or tyranny.” Anchoring his critique in a call to virtues of truth and justice long instrumentalized through the Islamic concept of “being,” Hashed constructs his obloquy against liberal binaries between the public and the private, the state and the citizen-subject, and politics and religion so intrinsic to secular power in an international community dominated by Western powers (Agrama 2012, 70-73). As rejoinder to the hunger-strike protests in Taʿizz, the memoire draws special attention to the ways political agency can be mobilized through a visceral and passionate engagement with the boundaries of religious tradition, a finitude located, in accordance with Furani’s approach to the secular, in collaborative acknowledgement of forms of sovereignty, knowledge and certitude that pervert religion’s ethical compass. In league with workers in Taʿizz who fasted in public while holding empty plates in their laps, mourning over their humiliation (*dhill*) and loss of dignity (*karāmah*), Hashed’s memoire, both a lament and a diatribe, frames hunger-strike activism more explicitly as a kind of Islamic reform.

**Secularism as a Modality of Islamic Reform**

On the tenth day of Hashed’s hunger strike, another autobiographical memoire was shared among May 20th supporters. This time, the writer was Iranian and an image of the volume, *Min Balāṭ al-Shāh Ilā Sujūn al-Thawrah* (From Palace to Prison: Inside the Iranian Revolution; 2007 [1994]) by sociologist Ihsan Naraghi, was shared with supporters on Hashed’s Facebook page. Once again, Islamic fasting traditions serve as an ethical touchstone for the author as he narrates his efforts to persuade the Shah of the opposition’s credibility and adopt much-needed reforms. As in Hashed’s own memoire, opposition leaders draw unprecedented support for their cause by staging their protests as an Islamic fasting ritual, one whose significance for the state was underscored by its occurring on the same day as one of Islam’s two major feast traditions, in this case the Festival of Breaking the Fast (*ʿĪd al-Fiṭr*) just four months before the regime’s fall from power (14). Naraghi’s necropolitical critique is developed and given ethical momentum through his own encounter, several days after the strike, with the limits of the Shah’s understanding of Islam.

The reception of Naraghi’s memoire by May 20th activists is difficult to assess given the lack of comments on the Facebook page featuring the volume along with Hashed and others gathered around a coffee table in an ordinary Yemeni living room. The presence of the book in conversations with supporters during Hashed’s strike nevertheless deserves registering, especially given the importance of literary discussion in traditional afternoon social gatherings (*majālis*) in Yemen (Weir 1985). Naraghi, like Hashed and supporters, seeks radical reform in a Shiʾa-majority state without invoking the specter of a monolithic Islamic “Other” that might provide the state and its international backers with an easy excuse for blanket repression. Recalling conversations that he had with Muhammad Reza just prior to the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s return from exile in 1979, Naraghi focuses his memoire on his efforts to urge the Shah to meet with opposition leaders. His opening salvo is a short lecture to the Shah in which he calls the premier’s attention to wide-spread grievances over tremendous economic disparities that had emerged between the country’s elites, beneficiaries of American and Western investment, and the vast majority of citizens. For Naraghi, as for May 20th activists, the perils of foreign occupation are to be fought through popular support for redistributive justice, an ethical stance that he frames in terms of combatting the racialized legacies of a colonialist system premised on keeping the vast majority of Iranians captive behind what Mbembe calls the “mortuary mask” (2003, Kindle book location 888). Naraghi’s tactic for helping the Shah to understand the necropolitical violence enacted by his regime on most Iranians focuses, in the opening chapter, on his effort to help the Shah empathize with a chauffeur, a state worker who, like hundreds of thousands of others, had not been given a raise in over two decades. When presented by Naraghi with his employee’s monthly pay stub of 1,500 tomans (approximately US $350 at the time), the Shah stares at Naraghi with utter incomprehension, incapable of understanding whether his driver would have considered the sum a lot or a little. The incident reveals to Naraghi just how far the Shah had removed himself from concerns with the state’s basic responsibility to its citizens. In subsequent chapters of his memoire, Naraghi details the unfolding of the Iranian revolution as basic mechanisms of governance are subordinated to foreign interests, especially American. As in Hashed’s memoire, Naraghi’s relationship with an abusive patriarchal sovereign, one that leads to physical and psychological isolation as well as painful betrayal, provides the narratological structure for situating the instruments and stakes of sovereign power in daily life. Naraghi’s advocacy for more ethical forms of Islamic sovereignty emerges not only from his attention to fasting rituals drawing Iran’s diverse populace together but also to other religious repertoires for collective action, including financial loan programs managed by local mosques, storytelling and ritual traditions. His purported credibility as the Shah’s confidant, moreover, stems not from his training as a traditional Muslim scholar or from connections with pro-Khomeini revolutionary leaders but rather from his status as an outside observer of a youth-based religious movement, someone who urges Iran’s leader to acknowledge “the power of religious symbols” while keeping open the possibility of a political ethics not circumscribed by theological doctrine.

Furani’s approach to secularism offers a way to identify convergences between Naraghi’s memoire and Ahmed Hashed’s hunger-strike in such a way as to highlight broader changes underway in how Yemenis are mobilizing religion to achieve social justice. For Furani, secularity is not a linear or teleological process, whatever religious fundamentalists might say or, indeed, theorists of liberal modernity.[[35]](#footnote-35) The secular is what anthropologist Webb Keane calls an episodic affordance (2017, 27), a way of knowing or being whose ethical purchase is made available, in this case, through concepts of finitude. In Roman antiquity, Furani points out, the word *sacaelum* meant the duration of a period, from a beginning point to an end. Genealogies of this concept, he argues, long defined relations between worldliness – construed variously in registers of sensory temporality – and theism – something held to be transcendent and inscrutable while also elemental to the unfolding pathways of a moral universe. With special attention to the Qurʾan’s narrative of Abraham’s journey to monotheism, Furani shows how Abraham’s struggles with certitude, ways of knowing and sovereignty bring him into an encounter with finitude that is laden with doubt, alienation, fear and yearning. It is through this experience, he argues, that Abraham discovers “the real,” something that conditions the symbolic and is not merely reducible to it. Weary of the ways traditional definitions of secularism invoke polarities between reason and faith, knowledge and belief, the natural and the supernatural, the profane and sacred – all legacies of Europe’s Wars of Religion – Furani makes the secular integral to theological inquiry as well as to ethical traditions informed by it.

For Hashad and his supporters as for Naraghi, political action that is mobilized through Islamic fasting helps to stage sovereignty’s limits. An Islamic ethics more attuned to the needs of Muslim reformers and revolutionary movements takes root in marking transnational mechanisms of necropolitical subjugation as they are exacted on Muslim-majority states by an international order inextricably bound to American unipolar dominance. Religion has long played a pivotal role in shaping peoples’ views of death and dying, of course. Culturally responsive categories of theology and religious orthopraxy provide ethical templates whose historical and contextual contingencies offer believers valuable opportunities to reflect on religion’s socialization, for better or worse. Where political activists are able to draw global hierarchies of necropolitical sovereignty into the orbit of religious ritual, staging state-centric claims over who defines the capacity to live or die while at the same time troubling conventional distinctions between religion and politics, they open up new possibilities for suspending the ostensible totalization of secular power over its subjects. In his study of modern Islamic militancy, Faisal Devji (2008, 30) notes the increasing frustration felt by many Muslims with traditional theology’s emphasis on the Muslim community in particular and the necessity of waiting for Judgement Day. Given the fragmentation of institutional forms of order and politics in a global world, religious leaders’ assertions about the integrity of faith communities and salvatory cosmologies inevitably fall short, too often subordinated to the prerogatives of political and economic power. Seeking new transnational connections in a common struggle against humanity’s subjugation to what philosopher Georgio Agamben (1998, 4) has called a “bare, mortifying life,” Muslim reformers, according to Devji, have increasingly focused on the impact of violence on domestic life as a way to build common cause around the idea that human beings are agents, and not simply victims, of history. In Yemen, fasting rituals and their accompanying semiotics of bodily deprivation, loss, impassioned defiance and mourning help Muslims to organize this critique around the virtues of secular finitude, no more so than when staged through hunger strikes in ordinary and domestic settings.

As Hashed and supporters sought to situate his hunger strike in relation to Yemen’s spectrum of Islamic political, ethical and credal discourses, they enjoined audiences to focus on what the May 20th movement had identified, from its outset, as the single most important enemy: a “politics of starvation and subjugation” (*siyāsat al-tajwīʿ wa tarkīʿ*) waged on the country by “war governments.”[[36]](#footnote-36) While the latter included the Houthi regime itself, an active partner in Yemen’s devastating violence, the main source of unrest was “foreign aggression.” On a digital flyer circulated widely during Hashed’s strike, a picture of Hashed’s recumbent body is paired with images of Yemeni parliamentary members meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, allegedly during the period of the strike. An appended statement reads “in exchange for having met with the man whose airplanes have destroyed most of Yemen’s infrastructure, each delegate was compensated with no less than two-hundred thousand Saudi riyals.” Whatever foreign observers might say, Yemen’s problem was clearly bigger than an inter-Islamic proxy war between Iran-backed Zaidi Shiʾa and Sunni Arab petro-states. As outlined in founding May 20th statements several months earlier, the chief source of Yemen’s woes was an “imperial-colonial apparatus” dedicated to overthrowing Yemen’s sovereignty in the name of “regional, sectarian and religious fragmentation.” In public messaging and at rallies held in support of Hashed’s strike across the country, May 20th activists paired demands for the restitution of state workers’ lost wages and pensions with a denunciation of attacks by joint Arab Coalition forces and their Western allies. By linking workers’ rights to transnational patterns in the weaponization of hunger, May 20th activists urged supporters to mobilize chronic food deprivation toward Islamic ethical ends, as the “Battle of the Empty Stomachs” campaign suggested. Not only could hungry Yemeni bodies cue audiences to intimate connections between local, national and global forms of the necropolitical. They also had the potential to offer solutions, clarifying the finitude of ideologies dedicated to “religious fragmentation.”

Within the first week of the strike, Hashed’s actions drew support from over fifty political and tribal leaders from Zaidi and Shafiʿi-majority regions alike.[[37]](#footnote-37) At the end of week two, on August 26, an assembly of state workers, women as well as men, gathered outside parliamentary buildings to reaffirm their commitment both to May 20th objectives at the heart of Hashed’s strike and to the exercise of civil, nonviolent means to achieve them. “We are all Hashed,” their placards read, along with demands to “Pay our salaries.” An op-ed piece in the May 20th movement’s main electronic newspaper, *Yamanāt al-Akhbāriyyah*, provided activists with a way to reflect on the ethical and religious commitments that the fight against necropolitics entailed. Penned by Yemeni novelist and literary critic ʿAbd al-Karim al-Razihi and entitled “Hashed and the Lotus Flower,” the essay began with a critic’s observations on the contrast between Hashed’s popularity during Yemen’s 2011 revolution and what he alleged to be the opposition’s lukewarm support for his hunger-strike tactics in August 2017. Al-Razihi responds to the critic with a metaphor:

‘The lotus flower is one of the strangest phenomena in existence!’ I told him. ‘It grows in the middle of marshes, in bogs and fetid swamps. It is a symbol of change, detachment and transubstantiation. It transforms putrid bogs and morasses into perfume [...] Little wonder that, in the East, the flower is a symbol of change, transformation and enlightenment!’

‘What’s your point?’ he asked. ‘What's the relation between Ahmed Saif Hashed's hunger strike and this lotus flower?’

‘We are living in an grotesque swamp, my brother. Our political parties, parliaments, governments, and leaders – political, organizational, cultural: all are riddled with corruption [...] And yet, in the midst of this horrific mire, on the crest of an inundation threatening us all, the fragrant lotus blossom has sprouted. It gives flesh to something never before seen among parliamentarians: the human being. I am loath to call Ahmed Saif Hashed a ‘freedom fighter,’ for such a person is a scoundrel. Ahmed Saif Hashed is no friend of scoundrels. Neither is he a politician, because the politician is an opportunist and a coward.’[[38]](#footnote-38)

Likening politics to a dystopian “swamp,” al-Razihi evokes a necropolitical landscape in which self-serving and hypocritical politicians reek of unnatural decay and corruption. Finitude, threatening to engulf Yemenis in the sights, smells and sensations of both a “mire” and an “inundation,” describes the effects of “political parties, parliaments, governments and leaders.” Furani’s approach to the secular provides a road-map for understanding how the author envisions religion to be a solution. Employing terms commonly associated with religious asceticism in a variety of traditions, including detachment (*insilākh*), transubstantiation (*istiḥālah*) and enlightenment (*tanwīr*), al-Razihi offers sustained reflection on the power of a lotus flower, a symbol known especially “in the East” for its ability to purify the polluted and regenerate the decayed. Where selfish parliamentarians cheat state workers and endanger Yemen’s national sovereignty, a “human being” emerges, one who can convert political malefaction into beneficence. A few days later, another journalist, seeking to describe the religiosity advanced by Hashed’s strike, suggested that during a time in which people “have been subjected to a dejecting religion and negative blind obedience,” the May 20th Movement not only “gives a meaningful and tangible voice to passionate and active desires that swell in many a breast” but also “shatters conventional understandings of the sacred.”[[39]](#footnote-39) In modern currents of Sunni Islamic reform, the term “blind obedience” (*taqlīd*) had acquired an especially prominent place in critiques of traditional scholars whose overzealous favoring of legal precedent came at the expense of independent legal reasoning geared to the public benefit. Addressing Yemen’s problems, as May 20th activists knew, required courage in revisiting oppressive conventions of Islamic thought, above all, legal as well as ethical.

In days to follow, Hashed found his bodily strength deteriorating to the extent that he was hospitalized. Supporters rallied together in commending the radical nature of his religious leadership, likening his struggle to that of another founding anti-colonialist, a man also known for using the religious fast in necropolitical critique: Mahatma Gandhi. After one poet likened Hashed to the “Gandhi of Yemen,” a sobriquet that, while invoked to describe the actions of Yemeni nationalists in the past, had never been used for anyone actively occupying a parliamentary building, journalist Ashraf al-Kibsi published an imaginary letter to Hashed elaborating further on his Indian counterpart. For al-Kibsi, Hashed’s strike was especially meaningful because it was launched at a time in which so many other Yemenis were facing chronic food deprivation and suffering: “Dear Ahmed Saif: Maybe you might think that I should resist efforts to ‘Gandhify’ you, instead wishing you ‘well-being’ in the face of bombing campaigns, cholera, corruption and struggling over values and empty stomachs […] While I am your supporter and am by your side, at every step, your hunger-strike sets you miles apart […] from every other politician, as you well know: they offer to sacrifice themselves only in their short electoral speeches, and not even during the long month of Ramadan do they find themselves hungry!”[[40]](#footnote-40) In contrast with politicians who failed to understand the primary objective of Islam’s main fasting ritual, Hashed exemplified religious leadership through self-sacrifice on behalf of others. He was on his way to pulling off what Gandhi achieved in another era of Western colonial domination. At the very least, the figure of Gandhi, renowned Hindu ascetic, marked the limits of what ordinary Muslim leaders, plagued with moral and religious duplicity, could ever aspire to.

**Recentering Skepticism in Islamic Studies**

In his article “Is there a Postsecular?”(2015), Furani ponders scholarly claims, made especially during the 1990s and 2000s, that religion has “returned” as an influential force in public life after a long period of marginalization or suppression by competing variants of nationalism. The problem with these arguments, according to Furani, is not chiefly weak evidence showing that religion had, in fact, ever retreated from social life. Rather, in order to advance theories about a “postsecular” age, those advancing such a thesis adopt understandings of religion that are indebted to nation-state and Euro-Protestant ideologies; religion becomes, by definition, always exterior to the reason-based and deliberative mechanisms of secular political governance.

In exploring Yemeni hunger activists’ efforts to seek justice against “war governments” both domestic and foreign, this paper echoes Furani’s call to situate religion within, rather than outside, complex histories of the secular. In some respects, this turn toward theorizing secularism as a particular kind of religion is indebted to work by anthropologist Talal Asad. According to Asad, secularism has “genealogies” (1993), the origins of which stem not only from Western colonialism but also from religious formations accompanying it. For colonial oppressors, religion was best exhibited through inward, private “beliefs” rather than through deliberative political life and debates about morality (Asad 1993, 205). Exemplary religious leaders absented themselves from contests over state power. Students of Asad would expand his insights fruitfully in studies of modern Egyptian governance, exploring the complicity of Westernized ideals of religious liberty (Mahmood 2016), public order (Agrama 2012), individual rights (Mahmood 2005), and rational deliberation (Hirschkind 2006) with structures of secular power. Furani’s approach conveys the spirit of these critiques. By highlighting secularity’s epistemological and ontological dimensions rather than its role in political doctrine, however, Furani joins scholars who have criticized Asad and his students for reducing the ethical lifeworlds of Muslims to their function in responding to, and often being interpolated by, a powerful liberal state (see, e.g. Omer 2015; Abbas 2014; Berlinblau 2014). With the aim of extending Furani’s insights, this analysis of Yemeni hunger strike activism seeks to recover currents of Muslim reform that are missed when focusing on religion’s intractable engagement with liberal state power. As Abdulkader Tayob (2020, 17) has argued in his review of contemporary scholarship on Islam and modernity, a focus on “everyday” as opposed to pietistic “virtue” ethics can better situate Muslim subjectivities in an ambivalence toward hegemonic norms of religiosity that has long been cherished in struggles against colonialism, state-making and capitalism.

Centuries of dynastic patrimony, shifting tribal alliances and competing imperial projects in Yemen – Portuguese, Ottoman, British, Soviet, American – frustrate Western models of state-building premised on a commonly shared national origin story (often one founded in revolution against a monarchy), a commitment to republican egalitarianism undergirded by expanding commodity markets, and public trust in the legitimacy of constitutional law backed by a separation of powers (Schmitz 2014). In the post-cold war period, the Yemeni conflict of 1994 pitting southern Yemeni separatists against Sanaa in a confrontation re-animating decades of global and regional agonism brought into stark relief Yemen’s status as a “human-security state” (Amar 2013). Emboldened by the waning credibility of neoliberal market legitimations and consumerist ideologies across the Global South, the human-security state outsources many of its public functions into a parallel realm of “parastatal formations” that include public-private partnerships, the mobilization of non-government organizations, and development expertise. When hunger-strike activists turn to rituals of religious fasting in order to help stage dissent, they advance the virtues of inter-Muslim solidarity in fighting necropolitical forms of governance that drive the security state.

Revolutions across the Middle East over the last decade have imbued religious holidays with a heightened capacity to draw attention to the necropolitical dimensions of continuing authoritarianism. Acute disagreements about the timing and regulation of collective fasting rituals have broken out, calling into question the credibility of officials who have been commissioned by state and international powers to coordinate and supervise them.[[41]](#footnote-41) The debilitating role of Islamic activism sponsored by “war governments” has been glaring for many Yemenis, a situation that has helped set the stage for alternative visions of Islamic reform. As I have shown in this paper, hunger strike activism sheds light on a history of struggle against necropolitical power that has drawn from workerist movements attuned to the hypocrisy of religious vocabularies used for ill gain. The Houthis, like other political juntas across the Global South that have come into power through revolution, unconstitutional seizure or disregard for established electoral mechanisms, have found an appeal to anti-imperialism crucial to building legitimacy (Clausen 2018). This focus has been magnified given the regime’s dependency on political networks loyal to former president ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh (at least prior to the leader’s 2017 murder). In coordination with this emphasis on external threats, the Houthis’ main political party, Ansar Allah, has steadily branded itself capable of representing all Yemenis, not just the Zaidi state.[[42]](#footnote-42) The cross-sectarian strains of religious critique and reform mobilized by May 20th supporters are representative not only of a broader swath of opposition activists and skeptics across the country, but also of important segments of the country’s new political class in Sanaa.

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2. Yemeni Polling Centre, 2017 report. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Yemen Crisis: 85,000 Children ‘Dead from Malnutrition," BBC News report, Nov 21 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “*Yemen Today News* announces Representative Bishr’s Decision to Support Hashed Assures the Government’s Commitment to Pay Salaries [of State Workers]” (author’s translation), August 3, 2021; <https://bwabtk.com/484592.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. C.f. Shargabi (2013, 116.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Yamanāt al-Akhbāriyyah*, June 1 2017 ([yemenat.net/2017/06/293955/](http://yemenat.net/2017/06/293955/)). The joint manifesto from May 11, 2016 is cited in its entirety here. The movement’s anti-imperialist discourse is also clear in a statement released on August 11 2018 ([www.facebook.com/20mau/posts/916816921990109](https://www.facebook.com/20mau/posts/916816921990109).) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The conference followed up on a National Dialogue Conference that convened on multiple occasions over a year and a half beginning in March 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Houthi administration was hamstrung in September 2016 when Yemen’s Central Bank moved from Sanaa to Aden under pressure from the Gulf Cooperation Council. At that point, salary payments to most government employees stopped. By 2018, approximately 1.25 million civil servants still had not been paid or had received salaries only intermittently. They are estimated to be the sole breadwinners for a quarter of the population (see the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington’s 2019 report, 5.) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. C.f. Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation’s 2018 report. The study reports an increasing use of hunger strikes in Algeria since 2011, especially by journalists. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [akhbaralyom-ye.net/news\_details.php?sid=23830](https://akhbaralyom-ye.net/news_details.php?sid=23830) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [www.alsahwa-yemen.net/view\_nnews.asp?sub\_no=401\_2010\_01\_16\_75354](http://www.alsahwa-yemen.net/view_nnews.asp?sub_no=401_2010_01_16_75354) (Accessed mid 2016 but removed and unavailable by May 2020.) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See “Gulf of Aden Security Review,” March 22, 2010, www.criticalthreats.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The majority of strikes have been by incarcerated detainees. In southern Yemen through 2019, over a dozen strikes involving hundreds of men and women focused on a network of an estimated eighteen prisons built and managed by the United Arab Emirates since 2015. In northern Yemen, some sixty-five prisoners conducted hunger strikes in Sanaa in May 2018 and November 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. According to Mbembe, necropolitics refers to the ways in which “the ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and the capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” (chapter three; Kindlebook location 1373). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *The* *Washington Post* op-ed section, April 8, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Real” definitions of religion, focusing on how religion affects its subjects and often employed by social scientists, obscure religious formations that are better accounted for through “nominal” definitions, the latter of which foreground meaning-construction (Sommerville 2009, 29-31). In their survey of press coverage in *The* *New York Times*, for example, Scanlan et. al. (2008, 295-297) report that only 3.8% of stories about hunger strikes involved “religious figures/activists” and that a mere 1% mobilized “religious authorities and institutions.” By anchoring their findings in conventional religious institutions and figures rather than in the meaning or, as explored in this paper, the ethics of religion as shaped by social and cultural forces, they render invisible currents of religiosity and skepticism mobilized by hunger strike activists such as those in the May 20th movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Supporter “Carina Kinder” on May 15, 2017 (original page no longer available). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Comments by supporter “Nazir al-Amal” on Hashed’s FaceBook page on August 23, 2017; on the concerned report, see *Sharḥ Muslim* by Imam al-Nawawi, *ḥadīth* no. 1176. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The following transmitted report is often cited in this argument: “No harm shall be inflicted or reciprocated (*Lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār*)”. Also common are reflections on the Qurʾanic verse: “Do not throw [yourselves] with your [own] hands into destruction [through abnegation]” (*Sūrah of the Cow*, verse 195). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. C.f. an undated fatwa entitled “*Ḥukm al-Iḍrāb ʿan al-Ṭaʿām Ḥatā al-Mawt*” issued by the Saudi Chief Jurisconsult ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Ibn Baz ([binbaz.org.sa/fatwas](https://binbaz.org.sa/fatwas/2470)); a 2014 interview on the topic with leading salafi Nasr al-Din al-Albani ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nk4heMfwb4o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nk4heMfwb4o)); ʿAli bin Salih al-Gharbi 2011; and a fatwa by Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadʿi published in *Ghārat al-Ashriṭah ʿalā Ahl al-Safasṭah wa-l-Jahl*, undated but likely from the 1990s. I have found references to all these opinions on social media posts favored by Yemenis. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. C.f. Saudi salafi shaikhs ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Tarifi (in 2014) and Ahmed Jibril (n.d. [www.Ahmadjibril.com/articles/hungerstrike.html](http://www.Ahmadjibril.com/articles/hungerstrike.html)); according to the date of the posting, possibly from the early 2000s) and also Kuwaiti Shaikh ʿUthman al-Khamis (2018 interview entitled “*Ḥukm al-Iḍrāb ʿan aṭ-Ṭaʿām”* available on YouTube). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. C.f. a 2014 interview (ar.islamway.net/video/37581) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. [www.askthesheikh.com/what-does-islam-say-about-hunger-strikes-against-oppression-which-can-cause-death/](http://www.askthesheikh.com/what-does-islam-say-about-hunger-strikes-against-oppression-which-can-cause-death/) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Al-Gharbi 2011, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. C.f. interview on May 25, 2009 (malayur-news.blogpost.com [cached url]). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Although Saudi scholar ʿAbdallah bin Mubarik Āl Saif (2006) attributes hunger strike tactics to Leftists, communists and nationalists, his book on the topic neverthelss situates such strikes amidst noble traditions of Islamic fasting. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Houthi concessions were limited given that the country’s largest currency reserve had been relocated to Aden in 2015 (see ftn 8). Accordingly, from early on, May 20th activists focused their critique of state neglect equally on President Hadi’s administration. Taʿizz thus became a more productive stage than Sanaa for fielding the movement’s grievances, dominance over the city having been secured by the Hadi administration by 2016. When, approximately six months after Hashed’s strike, the southern government tried to address strikers’ demands by bringing 180 million YR to Aden on eleven boats, the United Arab Emirates blocked the convoy from docking in the interest of asserting its own regional control. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. In October 2019, a nine-year old gained attention on social media for celebrating his birthday by holding up an empty plate, asking viewers to skip a meal, and launching his own three-day fast to galvanize support for ending hunger in the country (see “Fast for Yemen”, October 3, 2019, www.middleeasteye.net). On February 8, 2020, unpaid state workers in Taʿizz staged a collective public meal in which foodless plates were distributed and blame was placed on regional leaders, the Hadi government and the Arab League ([www.alayyam.info/news/83G2T1QH-EOSMA0-C4CE](https://www.alayyam.info/news/83G2T1QH-EOSMA0-C4CE)). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Collective fasting and strikes would continue for at least a week and a half before being called off. Follow-up strikes continued in October (marebpress.net/news\_details.php?sid=130725). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Narrated by Abu Saʿid al-Khudri, the report was preserved in two most authoritative *ḥadīth* compendia for Sunni Muslims, those by Muhammad al-Bukhari (*ḥadīth* no.1992) andMuslim Ibn al-Hajjaj (no.827). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Al-Gharbi 2011. 8-9. Fasting on the three days following *ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā*, a period known as *Tashrīk*, is also considered invalid (islamqa.info/en/42106). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The author has found reports of strikes launched on either the Day of Sacrifice or the Breaking of the Fast in Tunisia, Morocco, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine from 2000 onwards. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. The first part of the memoire was published on February 19, 2020 (<https://yemenat.net/2020/02/365045/>), eleven days after the Taʿizz strike began (<https://www.alayyam.info/news/83G2T1QH-EOSMA0-C4CE>). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The *ḥadīth,* recorded by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal as well as Abu Dawood al-Sijistani, is reported to have come from the Prophet Muhammad: “Teach your children to pray when they are seven years old, and if they reach ten and have not learned to pray regularly, smack them lightly and separate them in their beds.” [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Such theorists pair the rise of secularism to modernity and include Charles Taylor, Jurgen Habermas and Talal Asad. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See the May 22, 2017 statement made on Yemen’s Unification Day celebration ([yemenat.net/2017/05/292930/](https://yemenat.net/2017/05/292930/)). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Prominent Zaidi supporters included parliamentarian ʿAli al-Bukhaiti of the Dhamar governorate and the leader of the Vanguards Movement of Revolutionary Yemen, Shaikh Sadiq ʿAbdallah Abu Shawarib. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Yamanāt al-Akhbāriyyah*, August 19, 2020 ([yemenat.net/2017/08/301918/](https://yemenat.net/2017/08/301918/)). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Al-Qaʿidi, Haʾil, *Yamanāt al-Akhbāriyyah*, August 24, 2017 ([www.yemenat.net/2017/08/302228](http://www.yemenat.net/2017/08/302228)). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Yamanāt al-Akhbāriyyah*, August 28, 2020 ([www.yemenat.net/2017/08/302485](http://www.yemenat.net/2017/08/302485)). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. During the fast of Ramadan in 2019, Saudi Arabia and Iran, at loggerheads over the war in Yemen, announced different days for Breaking of the Fast, the former Tuesday June 4th and the latter one day later. Confusion erupted across the Muslim world as other countries sought to guide their own national communities. In Yemen, the Houthis followed Iran’s prescription while southerners followed the Saudis, a fracas unprecedented in the country’s history. Other nations, including Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, experienced similar wrenching disputes. The fall-out over different fasting rites exceeded sectarianism between Sunnis and Shiʾa. The Sunni-majority countries of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, for example, all followed Iran, while in the Sudan regional leaders broke rank with the state according to political party loyalties. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. As geographer Charles Schmitz (2015) has pointed out, Ansar Allah has led successful recruitment campaigns across the country, including areas such as Taʿizz where the May 20th movement has many supporters. Its early fight against ʿAli ʿAbdullah Saleh as well as against Saudi influence in the country proved to be well-received. Part of its campaigning has focused explicitly on building coalitions across entrenched religious groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)