Unconquerable by Force Alone: Ottoman Campaigns in the Highlands of Yemen, 1569-71

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Abstract

The character of warfare is ever-changing, while terrain remains static. Nowhere is this more evident than in the unforgiving mountains of Yemen's highlands. The Ottoman armies of the sixteenth century were among the strongest in the world, yet they failed to decisively defeat the Zaydis—a small band of loosely affiliated tribal fighters united through a branch of Shi'a Islam rooted in those highlands. This study employs descriptive inquiry to analyze primary source materials from participants in the battles, along with writings by other observers in Yemen during the campaigns. Secondary sources include histories by Arab authors writing at the time. Difficult terrain, ardent tribal solidarity, and mismatched tactics ultimately enabled Zaydi forces to seriously challenge the Ottoman army. This study addresses a gap in modern historical and military scholarship on irregular mountain warfare. The lessons of this understudied case remain instructive.

KEYWORDS

Yemen, Ottoman Empire, Zaydi Islam, irregular warfare

Yemen's highlands are a sea of jagged rocks, rising thousands of feet into the sky from the flat coastal plain known as *Tihama*. Mountain fortresses dot the dramatic landscape, with near-vertical escarpments forming barriers between the deep, cool wadis below and the more than three dozen fortified strongholds above.[1] Against this backdrop, a tribal force in Yemen successfully fought a rebellion to resist the hegemony of a regional power. The uprising ended with a truce that virtually ceded control to the Yemeni highland tribe—a truce agreed to after the regional power suffered massive losses in men, money, and materiel. Meanwhile, a rising foreign fleet threatened sea lines of communication between the Pacific, Indian, and Mediterranean Oceans, seeking to change the status quo of lucrative trade between India,

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China, and Europe, with a key axis centered on the Red Sea coast beside Yemen. Although such a backdrop could have been drawn from current events, this was instead the situation for the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, as the Sublime Porte sought to suppress a Zaydi rebellion in Yemen while trying unsuccessfully to disrupt the expansion of Portuguese maritime control in the Indian Ocean.[2]

The Ottomans were one of the three so-called "gunpowder empires," pioneering the use of heavy weapons ahead of their European adversaries, ushering in combined arms, and reshaping battlefield geometry in ways that transformed how states waged war.[3] However, the Ottomans would find through experience that the demands of mountain warfare in the Yemeni highlands made the region unconquerable by force alone. Among the cliffs and rugged highlands, their man-portable cannons, long muskets, and massive *darbuzan* siege cannons proved to be problematic hindrances rather than the decisive battlefield weapons they were in Anatolia and North Africa.

In the 1560s, the Ottomans were quickly approaching the maximum extent of their physical empire, with costly defeats over a relatively short period solidifying their borders with neighboring European powers. Just two years before the rebellion in Yemen, the Ottoman army had barely survived an embarrassing engagement against a few hundred Knights of Saint John at Malta in May 1565.[4] In that engagement, the Ottoman land force commander quarreled with the Ottoman naval force commander over who had strategic priority, which, along with tactical and operational miscalculations, contributed to a seventy-five-percent casualty rate for the Ottoman force at Malta. At the same time, the Ottoman economy was rocked by runaway inflation starting around 1565, increasing unabated until 1625.[5] The Sublime Porte could not afford to lose access to the lucrative customs duties levied on spices heading westward past Yemen, destined for distribution from Ottoman ports in Egypt gained after the Mamluk collapse in 1517.[6] The ports in Yemen were critical stopover points on this journey, as mariners sailing between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea via Egypt required about six days each way.[7] The Ottomans had to seize and hold Yemen if their economic position was to remain favorable, while also deterring the Portuguese from contesting their sea lines of communication and key ports of entry.

To that end, the Ottomans began expeditions in 1538 to unseat the Portuguese from ports in India that were increasingly falling under the Kingdom of Portugal's control.[8] The Portuguese were also supporting local rulers with supplies and military advisors as far afield as Ethiopia, Tunisia, and India.[9] Closer to Istanbul, the Portuguese India Armada had also begun taking key ports around the Arabian Peninsula, especially those of Hormuz and Aden, threatening Ottoman control of waterways traditionally under Muslim control.[10] In 1551, the Ottomans tried to unseat the Portuguese from Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, but instead only succeeded in temporarily recapturing nearby Muscat.[11] By then, Ottoman power in the Indian Ocean was effectively limited to the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, and parts of the western and southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Yemen, therefore, was critically important for keeping a toehold along a key maritime line of communication that was fast drying up for the Ottomans.

Amid this competition between empires, the capable Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent died. The new Sultan Selim II was untested, and local factions in peripheral governorates like Yemen began testing the new power arrangements brought about by this change. It was during this period of uncertainty that the Zaydi imam al-Mutahhar bin Sharaf al-Din decided

to rebel against Ottoman control over the mountainous part of Yemen that had been split off from the lowlands and deserts in December 1565 by Ridwan Pasha, the Ottoman governor of the province.[12] In 1564, the governor imposed an exorbitant new tax on both the Ismailis and the Zaydis east of Sanaa. He then refused to affirm a peace treaty between the Ottomans and Zaydis that had held for the previous 14 years. These twin acts served as the sparks igniting the Zaydi rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, beginning with Mutahhar's successful capture of Sanaa from the Ottomans in June 1567.[13]

Three key problems beset the Ottomans as they embarked on their campaign against the Zaydi rebellion in Yemen's mountainous highland province in 1569. First, basic logistics were impeded by extreme terrain features, both in elevation and in variation between low and high ground in relatively short spans. The Ottoman campaign failed to achieve its strategic objectives, as planners lacked appreciation for the different demands of the *Tihama* coastal plain and the surrounding mountains. Second, local support for the Ottomans was tenuous due to poor political leadership from the previous two Ottoman governors. An early failure to exploit the lack of social cohesion between the tribes—especially between the Zaydis and Ismailis—considerably slowed the Ottoman advance into the mountains. Third, the decentralized Zaydi tribal forces employed tactics with which the Ottomans were unaccustomed. The Ottomans refused to adopt modified tactics and continued to expect the Zaydis to agree to pitched battle on open ground throughout the campaign, something the Zaydis never did.

In the end, the plain remained under the control of a faction comprising Ottomans and local Ismailis, while the mountains around the main fortresses remained under the control of the defending Zaydis. Zaydi resistance in the mountains pushed Ottoman sovereignty down to lower elevations, where it remained for the rest of the empire's existence. The Zaydi-Ismaili rivalry, though initially ignored by the Ottomans, resolved itself along the contours of this same variation in physical geography. Although the Ottoman expeditionary commander was eventually able to make peace terms with the Zaydi forces in 1570, the Ottomans suffered throughout the campaign due to poor understanding of the mountainous terrain in Yemen, lack of engagement with local tribal elements, and refusal to employ strategies and tactics necessary for decisive outcomes.

Literature Review

Although studies of the Ottoman Empire abound, relatively few describe the conflict in Yemen in the sixteenth century. Even fewer devote more than a few pages to the campaign. The most updated survey of the empire is found in Caroline Finkel's *Osman's Dream*, while *The Ottoman Centuries* by Lord Kinross remains a stalwart study of the topic, despite not being updated for five decades. Finkel briefly noted the Zaydi rebellion, but Kinross did not. While Finkel omitted much detail, she helped contextualize Ottoman attitudes toward Yemen along with the regional consequences of their inability to fully subdue the highlands. J. Richard Blackburn, a contemporary of Kinross, wrote the first modern study of conditions leading up to the Zaydi rebellion against the Ottomans, albeit from a political rather than military perspective. Blackburn stopped one year short of the Ottoman campaign to suppress Mutahhar's rebellion in 1569.[14] Indeed, his stated purpose in that study was to examine the events presaging the campaign rather than to analyze its conduct. No academic source covers

the campaign against the Zaydis in this period, leaving primary sources as the sole resource upon which to rely.

Primary sources related to the events of 1567-70 are found in both Arabic and Turkish firsthand accounts. Some works produced shortly after the campaign, following interviews with participants, also contribute to this body of written sources. Although no account from Mutahhar's side exists in any language, the Turkish and Arabic sources shed enough light on events to allow for objective analysis from otherwise subjective writings. The best primary source in Arabic is *al-Barq al-Yamani fi al-Fath al-'Uthmani* (*Lightning over Yemen by the Ottoman Conqueror*) by the Mecca-based Islamic qadi Qutb al-Din al-Nahrawali al-Makki. Nahrawali based his account on interviews with several commanders and participants in the conflict, while the Ottoman force was resting in Mecca to complete the hajj before returning to Istanbul just a few months after the campaign ended. The account is strongly biased in favor of the Ottomans, with supplications and obeisance paid to the Ottoman commander Sinan Pasha throughout the narrative. Nahrawali went to great lengths to minimize the successes of the Zaydis in combat against the Ottomans, though the numbers of forces, Ottoman losses, and economic troubles he lists tell a more balanced story than his prose.

The long history of Yemen in general, and the Zaydis in particular, is represented to a degree in the primary literature, though only a few of these sources are easily accessible. Despite this challenge, primary sources dealing with Zaydi beliefs, culture, and history are exemplified by *Ghayat al-Amani fi Akhbar al-Qutr al-Yamani*, a history of Yemen written in Arabic one century after the events of 1569-70 and containing earlier accounts, including those written during the period in question.[15] Other primary sources concerning the highland physical geography, Zaydi religion, maritime concerns, and economy at the time include *Kitab al-Fihrist* (*The Book Catalogue*) by Abu al-Faraj Muhammad bin Ishaq al-Nadim and *al-Muqaddimah* (*The Prologue*) by Ibn Khaldun. Most of the Turkish written records from the Ottoman campaign itself are locked away in Istanbul and are unavailable to the public

The paucity of primary and secondary sources necessitates a qualitative approach. With too few sources for quantitative analysis, this study draws on qualitative methods, relying most closely on descriptive inference as applied in the evaluation of rational choice theory.[16] Further, the battle analysis method developed at West Point is also useful as a background tool when analyzing the specific tactical engagements listed throughout the primary sources, especially those found in Nahrawali's record noted above.[17] Variations of battlefield analysis as a qualitative method abound in professional military education institutions. A few steps are combined to analyze mountain warfare during the 1569-70 Ottoman campaign in Yemen.[18] Notably, the qualitative approach, focused through battlefield analysis, reveals that the combined characteristics of the specific terrain, tribes, and tactics in the campaign exerted significant influence on the outcome. More revealing, however, is the analysis of this conflict using the model of sovereign dysfunction derived from irregular war theory.[19]

The campaign is a pre-modern example of the irregular war conditions arising when the independent variable of sovereign dysfunction interacts with the dependent variable of sovereign territory. The recognized sovereign in these places was the Zaydi imam Mutahhar rather than the Ottoman sultan Selim II. This Zaydi sovereignty was derived not only from opposition to the poor Ottoman governance of the area over the previous decade, but also from the cultural and religious aspects of the Zaydi faith, a sect the Hanafi Ottomans viewed

as heretical. Viewing the conflict from this framework allows the contours of the problem to be more apparent, while setting the boundaries of inquiry around the three dimensions of terrain, tribes, and tactics in Yemen's mountainous highlands.

An Examination of Terrain, Tribes, and Tactics

Although mountain warfare in the sixteenth century was significantly different from today, there is still much to learn from the Ottoman experience. The campaign of 1569-70 provides three key lessons. First, difficult terrain can serve as an equalizer between unbalanced forces. Second, gaining support from indigenous groups is critical, especially in areas where geography fosters cultural isolation. Third, tactics must be adapted to defeat an adversary despite the pull of tradition. Combined, these elements contribute to an irregular war condition that emerges from the interaction of sovereign dysfunction over sovereign territory—an enduring condition in Yemen's highlands that persists to the present.[20] That dependent variable of sovereign territory was strongly shaped by the independent variable of sovereign dysfunction under Ottoman governance of the southern Arabian Peninsula in the sixteenth century. It is in this context, and with these variables, that the underlying causal factors can be examined as they relate to the Ottoman military's lessons from its mountain warfare campaign.

Lesson One: Terrain

The geography of Yemen was well known to Ottoman military planners. A tenth-century manuscript, the *Iklil* by al-Hassan al-Hamadani, described Yemen's geography in detail and was prized for its accuracy. The *Iklil* remained an influential reference for Ottoman forces stationed in Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the campaign.[21] Additionally, many soldiers in the force had prior experience either in Yemen or in the mountainous areas around the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. Despite this knowledge, the Ottomans failed to adequately plan their marches, rarely used advance reconnaissance, and poorly adapted their logistics trains to the demands of extreme elevations, dramatic altitude changes, and sheer cliff faces characterizing Yemen's highlands. Their initial plans resembled those used on plains, valleys, and open desert rather than in the mountains they faced.

Meanwhile, intense rivalry between the incoming and outgoing Ottoman governors of Yemen led to a political division that further contributed to the isolation of the highlands. In December 1565, the province was divided into two parts purely along physical geography rather than cultural or religious lines. The dramatic mountainous highlands, called *al-jabal*, were split from the relatively flat coastal plain known as *Tihama*. The highland tribes included not only the Zaydis but also their arch-rivals, the Ismailis. When the Ismailis were cut off from the sea and dispossessed of their immense wealth, their leader chose to ally with the Zaydis against the Ottomans. By dividing the province this way, the Ottomans lost their most important ally in the highlands at the outset of the campaign—and the Zaydis gained one, albeit temporarily.

At the local level, the Ottomans focused on highly fortified mountain strongholds that were nearly inaccessible even with ropes and ladders, rather than pursuing more creative or dynamic approaches. This was partly due to Ottoman value judgments shaped by campaigns in flatter regions, such as Eastern Europe and Lower Egypt, where fortress seizure had strategic importance. In Yemen, the fortresses at places like Kawkaban, Thula, al-Zabir, and

Habb al-Arus—sited more than 9,000 feet above sea level—were not captured through Ottoman offensive action. Instead, they were either ceded through diplomatic exchanges that benefited the Zaydis or temporarily abandoned by the Zaydis amidst carefully planned guerrilla actions.[22] These actions led to significant Ottoman casualties, as the Zaydis exploited the rough terrain and high altitude to wear down the unacclimatized Ottoman army, destroy morale, and harass supply lines for over a year until the Ottomans lost the initiative and sought peace terms.

A comparison of Ottoman manpower at the beginning and end of the campaign paints a stark picture. At the outset, the main army from Egypt had about 3,000 to 5,500 cavalrymen, 10,000 camels, and thousands of additional troops from Syria and elsewhere around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.[23] Over the summer, Ottoman expeditionary forces numbered about 8,000, not counting troops already in Yemen when the rebellion began.[24] By February 1570, less than a year into the campaign, the Ottoman force had dwindled to just 1,200 men.[25] Although many were killed in battle with the Zaydis, a significantly higher number succumbed to disease and exposure in Yemen's harsh mountain climate—terrain they knew of, but did not truly understand.[26]

Lesson Two: Tribes

The Yemeni people had a long history of interactions with many cultures. For centuries, various Yemeni factions controlled maritime trade between what is now Indonesia, Madagascar, northeast Africa, and the Red Sea. These long-established trade routes likely even facilitated the spread of Islam to Indonesia in the fourteenth century.[27] In the tenth-century survey of Islamic culture known as *Kitab al-Fihrist*, the Zaydis were already viewed within the Muslim world as a distinct sect of Shi'a Islam and a key political player in Yemen's highlands.[28] Although the Zaydis were among the most important tribes in the area, they were not alone. The al-Nazari and Ismaili factions would prove critical to the outcome of the campaign.

The late Ottoman governor of the province, Mahmud Bey, had allowed his greed to overtake him upon entering the Arabian Peninsula. During his seven-year rule over Yemen, he dispossessed the al-Nazari family, the wealthiest in the highlands.[29] The al-Nazaris, a Sunni family, had long held good relations with the Ottoman central government in Istanbul. With that act of dispossession, the Ottomans immediately lost their most capable and well-funded local ally in the fight against Mutahhar's forces. Additionally, Ridwan Pasha, Mahmud Bey's successor as governor, began taxing non-Zaydi tribes that had traditionally been exempt from Ottoman levies starting in the 1560s. This dysfunctional governance pushed more forces into Mutahhar's camp, including their arch-rivals, the Ismailis.[30] But the alliance between Zaydis and Ismailis—rooted in shared contempt for the Ottoman governor—began to fracture when Sinan Pasha took steps to reconcile the economic and political issues that had fueled Ismaili resentment toward the Sublime Porte. After these changes took effect, those Ismailis who had initially sided with the Zaydis switched back to supporting the Ottomans, granting access to a key mountain pass and providing otherwise unobtainable information about the terrain.[31] Their leader acted as a military and cultural advisor to Sinan Pasha. Ultimately, this local Ismaili force facilitated peace negotiations between the Ottomans and Mutahhar.

The Ottomans were not the only participants struggling to maintain cohesion among the tribes. Some of Mutahhar's most capable lieutenants—including Da'i al-Salah and Da'i 'Abdullah—switched to the Ottoman side, primarily to strengthen their own political bases in the areas they controlled. The Ottomans relied heavily on indigenous forces like those under Da'i al-Salah, not only for advanced reconnaissance but also as conventional augments to the main force.[32] Indicating just how important this indigenous support was, an eyewitness to the campaign noted that Da'i al-Salah "invaded [Wadi Bawn] where he knew every village and farm. Every nook and cranny was known to him, and he had no fear of trouble from its people."[33] From late August to early September 1569, Da'i 'Abdullah played a pivotal role in convincing eight tribes to join the Ottoman side, sparing Sinan Pasha from having to confront them on the battlefield on his way to face Mutahhar. Additionally, the Ottomans relied on a force of Arabs called *shafalit* (sing. *shaflut*) to manage base camp operations, assist along the march, and supplement raiding parties.

The Zaydis faced further challenges in maintaining the foreign support that had initially bolstered their position at lower elevations. A major Ottoman concern in 1569 was that Aden would fall into Portuguese hands, jeopardizing Ottoman control of ships using key ports in India that stopped in the Arabian Peninsula en route to Egypt.[34] This was no idle concern, especially in light of the Zaydi rebellion. In Aden, Mutahhar had 400 soldiers and 600 musketeers working with about 20 Portuguese military advisors in May that year.[35] The Portuguese soon abandoned the Zaydis, departing for Goa with 20 ships. Shortly after, on 14 May 1569, the Ottomans recaptured the city using scaling ladders—a portent of the tactics that would prove necessary in the campaign to come.[36]

Lesson Three: Tactics

Terrain dictates how tactics can be employed on the battlefield. Yemen's highland province, with its jagged cliffs, rocky escarpments, and narrow valleys, required a tailored set of tactics unnecessary on the plains. The Ottomans were accustomed to the latter, and throughout the campaign, they refused to employ the strategies and tactics necessary for decisive outcomes against the Zaydis. They were also at a disadvantage in conducting intelligence operations. In one case, Sinan Pasha planned to reduce the six-day march from Dhamar to Sanaa to a single day to take Mutahhar's forces by surprise.[37] But Mutahhar had infiltrated Sinan's planning area with a spy, allowing him to evacuate to the mountain fortress at Thula before Sinan could strike. The Ottomans repeatedly missed opportunities to improvise, outwit their opponents, and use withdrawal, delay, or deception, even as casualties mounted. Part of this resistance to change was due to the complexity of the battlespace, but perhaps more was tied to Ottoman adherence to tradition, pomp, and display—all to their detriment.

In contrast, the Zaydis understood that their weapons were too weak and their manpower too small to stand against the Ottomans in open combat, whether on the plateaus of the highlands or the lower plains near the coast. Mutahhar's force never exceeded 1,000 men during the rebellion, and rarely did more than a few hundred ever take to the field to confront the Ottoman army.[38] The Zaydis were unafraid to try new tactics, even when the Ottomans were not. Indeed, a fuse was attached to a cat that was sent to ignite a massive gunpowder store in 1569—the first recorded use of an improvised explosive device.[39] The Zaydis also understood the importance of messaging, something the Ottomans did not. They mounted a deliberate religious propaganda campaign to shape the narrative about the Turks at the local

level and increase resistance.[40] This contributed to the Ismailis and other tribes joining Mutahhar's forces, as noted above. Further, the Ottomans never properly evaluated their victory and defeat conditions, measuring success by whether the Zaydis fled during skirmishes or whether towns were empty upon their arrival. Both conditions were planned in advance by the Zaydis and employed to great effect in thwarting the superior Ottoman force.

The cases of Jizan and Ta'izz illustrate these Ottoman miscalculations. Sinan Pasha arrived in Jizan in February 1569, taking the city without resistance.[41] The lower-altitude cities and villages continued to vacate ahead of his arrival throughout the campaign, which the Ottomans mistakenly counted as victories. In reality, the Zaydis simply moved to higher ground, occupying fortresses beyond the Ottomans' reach and using them as bases for guerrilla attacks. This became clear during the second planned tactical operation of the campaign on 29 April 1569. As the Ottomans approached, Zaydi forces abandoned Ta'izz, retreating to al-Qahirah, a fortress inaccessible to Ottoman forces.[42] However, on 3 May 1569, al-Qahirah was surrendered by Da'i al-Salah, a local Zaydi leader aligned with Mutahhar but more interested in increasing his own power.[43] Da'i al-Salah betrayed Mutahhar in exchange for joining the Ottoman army, having his life spared, and—perhaps most enticing—receiving uncontested control of Ta'izz from Sinan Pasha. As a result, Ta'izz passed into the Ottoman sphere of influence without a fight. Three months into the campaign, the Ottomans had yet to face Zaydi forces on the battlefield.

The Ottomans encountered a pattern en route to their first military objective of seizing Ta'izz that they would come to experience on a regular basis throughout the campaign.[44] The Zaydis vacated the lowland urban areas nestled in the cool, well-irrigated wadi as soon as the Ottoman forces came near.[45] From their positions in the mountains, the Zaydis lit signal fires to alert those already sheltered in citadels such as al-Qahirah, Thula, and Kawkaban. Meanwhile, Zaydi raiders harassed the Ottoman supply lines and placed rubble obstacles to block the best marching routes, forcing the Ottomans into channelized crevices that led to even more supply line harassment and casualties from the march itself.

After taking Ta'izz, the Ottomans proceeded toward al-Takar. However, the Zaydis broke down dams and flooded the primary routes with diverted water, forcing the Ottomans to take the longest and most difficult route along a path called Wadi Maytam.[46] On 4 June 1569, Zaydi forces ambushed part of the Ottoman column—500 horsemen and 200 marching cavalry.[47] After a day of fighting, the Zaydis retreated to the high ground. The Ottomans considered this a victory because the Zaydis would not fight on flat ground. This harassment tactic would become a common Zaydi method, requiring them to fight only for a short time before making a planned exit—though not without damaging goods, making off with raided supplies, and injuring or killing the isolated Ottomans.[48] Similarly, at 'Izz, despite heavy losses on the Ottoman side, the Ottomans declared a "blessed conquest" after the Zaydis fought throughout the day on 25 June 1569 before completely evacuating to a fortified position.[49] Two days later, on 27 June 1569, the Zaydis carried out two such attacks successfully: first at Mount Ba'dan and then at al-Shamahi.[50]

On 8 October 1569, Sinan Pasha launched his long-awaited assault on Kawkaban. The Ottomans attempted to scale the sheer cliffs at Bayt 'Izz, a necessary intermediate point to access Kawkaban, but the men were forced to use ropes rather than moving on foot.[51] Many fell to their deaths or suffered serious injuries in the attempt. The Ottomans carried muskets,

cannons, and *darbuzan* on their backs up the near-vertical cliff faces, all while the Zaydi above hurled stones downhill onto the Ottomans, imposing heavy casualties. The Ottomans abandoned the assault and settled for a protracted siege. This stand at Kawkaban ultimately led the Ottomans to abandon the campaign and reach a peace agreement with Mutahhar, ceding most of the original Zaydi territory back to him.

Conclusion

The sixteenth century marked the Golden Age of the Ottoman Empire, despite the sultanate being beset with near-constant military challenges all around the periphery of the state.[52] With important exceptions, the Ottoman military held a competitive edge over European military forces, especially after the capture of Constantinople in 1453, which ended the Eastern Roman Empire. Ottoman holdings expanded further with the conquest of North Africa following the fall of the Mamluks in 1517.[53] At the same time, however, the Ottomans suffered key defeats—ranging from minor tactical failures to massive, irreversible losses—in North Africa and the Indian Ocean. Yemen was the scene of a series of such setbacks.

The Turks were expelled permanently from Yemen's highlands in 1635 and would not return until the nineteenth century. The Ottoman army under Sinan Pasha learned its lessons about terrain, tribes, and tactics at immense cost, reduced in size and capability for years to come.[54] The conflict ended with a negotiated settlement—no small feat for a tiny tribal force fighting under the shadow of one of the strongest empires in the world.[55] A preliminary peace agreement was signed on 18 April 1570 between Mutahhar's nephew, Shams al-Din, and Sinan Pasha.[56] This was followed by Mutahhar's overarching peace agreement with Sinan Pasha on 21 May 1570, effectively ending the rebellion on favorable terms for Mutahhar and restoring his control over much of the territory contested during the campaign, all at great loss in blood and treasure for the Ottomans.[57] Indeed, this was the third such case of Mutahhar obtaining a favorable outcome against superior Ottoman forces in as many decades.[58]

But Mutahhar's story is just a single chapter in a long history of Zaydi resistance to foreign powers. Resistance from the highlands predates even the Zaydi sect: seventh-century Arab conquerors struggled to subdue Yemen's pre-Islamic tribes in the mountains. Later, the Mamluks abandoned their futile attempts to govern Yemen before their own demise in 1517. It took the Ottomans two centuries to bring Yemen reliably into their provincial system, finally establishing a modicum of control only in 1872 at the nadir of their empire. The British Empire faced similar difficulties after taking over from the collapsed Ottoman Empire in 1918. In the twentieth century, Yemen again split into two parts: one centered on the highlands, the other on the *Tihama* coastal plain and desert, not reunited until 1990. Just two decades later, amid the 2011 Arab Spring, Yemen descended into civil war with the Zaydi once again contesting the highlands against a Sunni regime. Backing that regime, Saudi Arabia invaded Yemen in 2015, ostensibly to quash what it advertised as an Iranian proxy war between the Zaydis and the Yemeni government. Yet history reveals that Yemen's dramatic mountain landscape makes conflict far more complex than that. For every valley and lofty fortress, the highlands tell a multitude of stories. The Ottoman campaign of 1569–70 is but one. Whatever shape the next conflict takes, the same mountains will remain.

Endnotes

[1] These fortresses include al-'Arida, al-Ha'it, al-Mawhit, al-Munaqqab, al-Qahira, al-Rujum, al-Ta'kar, al-Tawila, al-Zafir, 'Amran, Bayt 'Izz, Barash, Bukur, Hababa, Habb, Habb al-'Arus, Hadur al-Shaykh, Hajar al-Rakanin, Husn al-Ahjir, 'Izzan, Kawkaban, Khadid, Lubakhah, Sanaa, Shamahi, Shamat, Shibam, Ta'izz, Thula, and Turyada.

[2] For a detailed history of the origins of Zaydi religious and cultural identity that began in 897 CE and lasts into the present, see A.B.D.R. Eagle, *Ghayat al-Amani and the Life and Times of al-Hadi Yahya b. al-Husayn: An Introduction, Newly Edited Text and Translation with Detailed Annotation* (master's thesis, Durham University, 1990), 45. The early years of the Arab conquests in the middle of the seventh century saw Yemenis distinguishing themselves in battle against the Byzantine Empire, with Yemenis making up most of the combat forces taking Egypt in the 640s. In 740, the son of the last Rashidun caliph, Zayd bin 'Ali, led an uprising against the Umayyad caliph. Although this attempt failed, his followers founded the Zaydi school of jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, based around the Banu Hamdan tribal area of northern Yemen. They traced their imams to the Prophet Muhammad through Zayd bin 'Ali, hence the name Zaydi. The proper name of the Zaydi belief system is *maddhab ahl al-bayt*, or "school of the people of the house," or, alternatively, "the school of the family of the Prophet Muhammad." Today's "Houthis" are Zaydis. The term "Houthi" comes from a later leader named Hussein al-Houthi (d. 2004), himself named after the al-Houth clan of the Banu Hamdan tribe.

[3] For the seminal study of how the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires earned the title "gunpowder empires," see William McNeill, "The Age of Gunpowder Empires, 1450–1800," in *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, ed. Michael Adas (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 200.

[4] John Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977), 250.

[5] Resat Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy: The Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 12. Locally in Yemen, a major contributor to this inflation was Mahmud Bey, the Ottoman beylerbey from 1560 until his assassination in 1567. Mahmud Bey devalued the *uthmani* currency with copper, bringing its value down from 60 to 1000 in exchange for the Ottoman gold dinar in just a few years. See J. Richard Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen, 968/1560–976/1568," *Die Welt des Islams* 19, no. 1/4 (1979): 125.

[6] Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire 1300–1923* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 155. The economic importance of securing trade routes through Yemen cannot be understated: total revenue after the war increased to 200,000 gold dinars annually, up from 50,000 in 1569 amid the Zaydi uprising. See Qutb al-Din al-Makki al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani fi al-Fath al-'Uthmani* [*Lightning over Yemen by the Ottoman Conqueror*], ed. Hamad Al-Jasir, trans. Clive Smith (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 61. Fully twenty nine percent of the Ottoman budget for Yemen in 1599 came from port dues collected on the coast, while fifty percent was paid by the *kharaj*, or land tax. These numbers far exceeded most other parts of the Ottoman Empire and were reflective of revenues from the spice trade generated via Yemen.

[7] Ibn Khaldun provides this estimate from about a century earlier. See Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddimah* [*The Prologue: An Introduction to History*], trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 51.

[8] Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 119.

[9] Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries,* 243-55.

[10] Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries,* 243.

[11] Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries,* 245.

[12] Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 155. This partition was Mahmud Pasha's idea but was not executed until Ridwan Pasha's tenure. See Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 137.
[13] Qutb al-Din al-Makki al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 215; Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 133. The Ismailis and Zaydis were traditional enemies despite both belonging to Shi'a minority sects. The tax imposed by the Ottomans was so unbearable that the two groups put their differences aside and joined forces by 1565. For the particulars of the 1552 treaty, see Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 135, 140. At least two other local tribal leaders rose against Ottoman dysfunction in Yemen: 'Isa bin al-Mahdi took up arms from Jazan in 1567, and Ahmad bin Abu Bakr al-Yafi'i in May of that year. See Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 150.
[14] Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen."
[15] For the definitive translation and exposition of this primary source, see A.B.D.R. Eagle, *Ghayat al-Amani*.
[16] For a detailed description of this method, see Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), chap. 4. See also Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
[17] Randall Bowdish, *Campaign, Operation, and Battle Analysis* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University, 2006). According to this method, the four steps of evaluating the strategic situation are (1) review tactical setting, (2) list other factors affecting the event, (3) state historical lessons, and (4) assess significance of the event.
[18] Bowdish, *Campaign, Operation, and Battle Analysis*, 2. Additionally, a methodology referred to as "threads of continuity" is sometimes used at West Point. This approach considers context surrounding a case holistically, drawing out broader implications.
[19] For the theory undergirding sovereign dysfunction in irregular wars, see Jonathan Hackett, *Theory of Irregular War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2023).
[20] Hackett, *Theory of Irregular War*.
[21] Qutb al-Din al-Makki al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*.
[22] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 84. Kawkaban fortress is 9,616 feet above sea level. Thula is 9,655 feet, al-Zabir is 10,070 feet, and Habb al-Arus is 9,511 feet.
[23] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 16.
[24] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 142. By June 1569, only 33 percent of Uthman Pasha's men had survived, and only 10 percent were capable of fighting. See also Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 195 n. 23; Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 170.
[25] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 123.
[26] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 142.
[27] Ismail Goksoy, "Ottoman-Aceh Relations According to the Turkish Sources" (paper presented at the First International Conference of Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies, 2007), 1–25.
[28] Abu al-Faraj Muhammad bin Ishaq al-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist*, 436–45.
[29] Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 129.
[30] Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 133.
[31] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 9.
[32] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 74. The title *da'i* means "missionary," but has been used by Shi'a in Yemen for the title of a venerated religious and political leader.
[33] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 75.
[34] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 30.

[35] Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 41.
[36] al-Nahrawali (2002, 41-2).
[37] al-Nahrawali (2002, 65).
[38] al-Nahrawali (2002, 123).
[39] al-Nahrawali (2002, 10).
[40] al-Nahrawali (2002, 9).
[41] al-Nahrawali (2002, 20).
[42] al-Nahrawali (2002, 22).
[43] al-Nahrawali (2002, 28-9).
[44] al-Nahrawali (2002, 20).
[45] al-Nahrawali (2002, 21-2).
[46] al-Nahrawali (2002, 49).
[47] al-Nahrawali (2002, 50).
[48] al-Nahrawali (2002, 51).
[49] al-Nahrawali (2002, 58).
[50] al-Nahrawali (2002, 60).
[51] al-Nahrawali (2002, 88).
[52] Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy*, 11.
[53] Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy*, 15; Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 213.
[54] Yemen was "regained for the Turks only at terrific cost in manpower, weapons, and funds," a somber admission in an otherwise strongly biased account favoring the Ottomans. Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 12.
[55] Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 155.
[56] The agreement entered into force on 16 May 1570 due to the time it took for the paper to be transported and verified. Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*, 163.
[57] Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 121.
[58] First, Mutahhar obtained a favorable peace treaty and *sancakbey* status in 1552, then won peace with Ridwan Pasha at immense loss to the Ottomans, and finally dictated the peace of 1570 discussed here. For the two earlier treaties, see Blackburn, "The Collapse of Ottoman Authority in Yemen," 147; for the third, see Al-Nahrawali, *Al-Barq al-Yamani*.