

The Houthis' Evolution, Governance, and Power

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By Ari Heistein



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Background and Development of the Houthi Movement

The Houthi movement (also known as *ansar Allah*) is predominant in Yemen's northern region where it controls the country's capital city Sanaa as well as some or all of 14 of the state's 21 governorates.¹ Yet, at the turn of the millennium, the proto-organization of the Houthis known as the "Believing Youth" (henceforth BY) had not yet established its infamous slogan² let alone engaged in combat against the central government of Yemen. In order to better understand the Houthi organization as it is today and how it might develop in the future, it is important to analyze how it evolved into its current state.

This report begins with examining historical trends which led to the rise of BY—particularly its evolution from a civil society movement to a state/proto-state. Then it analyzes Houthi governance and its internal power structure. Afterwards is a discussion of the Houthis' national security architecture and foreign policy, with particular attention to its principles and the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The following section details the humanitarian and economic challenges the Houthis face in solidifying their hold over Yemen. Then the final section of this research paper delves into the Houthis' ideology, its enforcement and dissemination, as well as the movement's views on Israel.

Four key historical events/trends can be attributed with creating an environment fertile for the rise of the Zaydi³ revivalist movement known as BY in the 1980s and 1990s. They are not necessarily responsible for the trajectory that the organization ultimately took, but they do explain how it initially gathered momentum. They include:

(1) The 1962 fall of the Imamate of Ahmad bin Yahya Hamid al-Din in North Yemen had long-term implications for the societal power structure there. Many groups that were powerful during the Imamate, especially the *sada* (pl. of sayyid, meaning descendant of the prophet Muhammad), were sidelined by a new tribal elite that would dominate the Yemen Arab Republic (1962-1990) in the North and then the unified Republic of Yemen (1990-present). The decline of the *sada*'s standing in post-1962 Yemen provided a religious/historical grievance for them, including the al-Houthi family, and a motive to subvert the post-Imamate order in order to regain power.

In parallel, the influence of tribal sheikhs co-opted in the post-1962 era eroded over time due to: a) growing inequality between leaders and tribesman which lead to alienation and resentment, b) sheikhs' loss of influence due to extended stays in Sanaa in order to engage in national politics – which left them unable to provide traditional sheikhly services such as conflict mediation for their tribes.

(2) The Yemen Arab Republic preferred a personal patronage system to ensure the loyalty of influential figures rather than investing resources in providing the population with infrastructure, institutions, and services. Sanaa's failure to provide services, particularly in the periphery, nurtured public resentment toward it and created an opening for "civil society" organizations like BY to fill that role.

(3) The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran offered inspiration for revolutionary Shia revivalism and political activism around the region, including in Lebanon (Hezbollah and Amal) and Yemen.

¹ Sadah, Amran, al-Jawf, Hajjah, Sanaa, al-Bayda, Marib, al-Hudayda, Dhamar, al-Bayda, Ibb, Taizz, al-Dalea, and Raymah.

² "Death to America, Death to Israel, God curse the Jews, Victory to Islam."

³ Also known as "Fiver Shia" because they follow the teachings of the fifth Imam Zayd Ibn Ali.

(4) From the 1980s onward, Saudi-funded salafist proselytization in northern areas of Yemen (in particular Dar al-Hadith in the Zaydi heartland of Dammaj) led to sectarian confrontations and nurtured a growing divide between Saada's Zaydi Shias and Shafi Sunnis.

In the nearly four decades since its inception,⁴ the BY/Houthi movement evolved from civil society to state/proto-state. The 1980s could be described as the period during which the proto-Houthi movement served as a civil society actor by holding BY summer camps, religious learning groups, and providing public services. The 1990s, or 1993-1997 to be precise, should be understood as the decade in which the Houthis became a political actor as embodied by the al-Haqq Party, with Husayn al-Houthi even serving as a member of parliament. Then, the first decade of the new millennium saw the Houthis emerge as a more radical and violent insurgent movement during the Saada Wars from 2004 to 2010. In the ten years that followed, the chaos caused by the implosion of the Saleh regime in 2011 enabled the Houthis to expand the scope of their control and activities to that of a state or proto-state.

One of the more interesting questions is why and how the BY evolved from civil society to armed insurrection at the start of the Saada Wars in 2004. The literature presents three potentially overlapping and even complementary explanations for this:

Domestic: In Marieke Brandt's work *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict*, she notes the concentration of power in Sana'a and the neglect of Saada governorate as a key long-term motive for the resentment fueling the insurgency.⁵ This answers the question of why opposition to the government grew; perhaps al-Haqq Party's failure to achieve much in the realm of electoral politics may help to explain why it became violent.

Ideological/Regional: Australian analyst Oved Lobel assesses in his paper "Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen" that BY's leadership, in particular the al-Houthi family, was heavily influenced by the transnational and militant ideology of the Iranian revolution for decades prior to the outbreak of the Saada Wars.⁶ Essentially, since the 1980s the Iran-led "axis of resistance" took a gradualist approach to cultivating a radical and expansionist militia in Yemen in order to oppose the pro-U.S./Saudi government in Sanaa.

Immediate Trigger: Isa Blumi explains that the increasingly aggressive policing of the Yemen-Saudi border from 2000 onward⁷ provoked a violent response from some of Yemen's northern tribes who were dependent on this porous boundary for herding livestock and cross-border smuggling.⁸

⁴ Estimated date of establishment is around 1986.

⁵ A 2009 cable by the U.S. Embassy in Yemen noted observed that the motivation behind the Houthi insurrection was political participation:

[Majed al-]Fahed added that the Houthis are more inspired by political grievances than by religious differences with the central government. This evaluation of the Houthi movement has been echoed repeatedly by other Sa'ada locals, including during discussions PolOff held on September 2 with Sa'ada tribesmen, who characterized the Houthis as a "social and political movement" rather than a religiously or ideologically motivated movement. According to Abdullah al-Muaid, Sa'ada local and Ministry of Local Administration official, the Houthis' primary goal is "convincing the central government to give more authority to the local levels...but not actual independence from Yemen."

https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANAA2079_a.html

⁶ <https://eeradicalization.com/becoming-ansar-allah-islamic-revolution-yemen-oved-lobel/>

⁷ This crackdown followed the Treaty of Jeddah in 2000 and the Saudi campaign against al-Qaeda beginning in 2003.

⁸ Isa Blumi, *Destroying Yemen: What Chaos in Arabia Tells Us about the World*, p. 166.

Information regarding the 2004-2010 conflict between the Houthis and the Government of Yemen (GOY) known as the Saadah Wars is fairly scarce due to a GOY-imposed media blackout on the issue. The violence first erupted on June 18, 2004, and by September of that year GOY forces killed the leader of the Houthi Movement, Husayn al-Houthi. For a brief period, Husayn's father Badr al-din al-Houthi (d. 2010) took the reins of the organization before passing them on to Husayn's half-brother Abdulmalik al-Houthi in 2005.⁹ Abdulmalik remains the group's top decision-maker at the time of this writing.

However, during the six rounds of fighting in the Saada wars from 2004-2010, the heavy-handed tactics used by the GOY forces¹⁰ failed to decisively quash the Houthi rebellion. If anything, the fighting appears to have further galvanized popular support for the Houthis in northern Yemen. This is attributed in part to the clumsy and ham-fisted military activities of the GOY which did not account for tribal sensitivities, including passing through tribal territories without permission, the destruction of tribesmen's homes, and the failure to utilize appropriate mediators to end the conflict. In contrast, the Houthis were keenly aware of how to maneuver regarding local tribal politics and customs, as numerous members of the al-Houthi family had married into prominent local tribal families. The Houthis also benefited from the "insurgents' advantage" at that point: since they were a rebel group rather than the rulers of Yemen, the poor governance of Yemen was attributed to the GOY while the Houthis' own corrupt, incompetent, and brutal governance style was not yet evident to the general population.

Following the Saada Wars, including the last tenuous ceasefire which was reached in 2010,¹¹ the outbreak of the Arab Spring led the Houthis to continue as an insurgent group while simultaneously engaging in national politics. According to a 2012 article published by *CTC Sentinel* at West Point:

The Houthis, unlike the opposition al-Islah Party, were quick to publicly support the [Arab Spring] and openly call for the downfall of the regime. Large anti-regime protests sprouted early in areas of Houthi influence, and the group's youth delegation set up a presence in the tent city of Sana'a's Sahat al-Tagheer ("Change Square")... When the GCC unveiled its plan to transition from the rule of Ali Abdullah Salih, both the Houthis and the youth rejected its legitimacy. Furthermore, they refused to recognize the agreement that Salih finally signed on November 23, 2011. The Houthis, along with revolutionary youth groups and the Southern Movement (Hiraak), boycotted the one-man elections for Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi.¹²

However, despite their initial opposition to the GCC-led transition process, in 2013 the Houthis joined the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) which was intended as an inclusive forum for Yemen's key stakeholders to outline the contours of a new constitution for Yemen. Yet, the process was derailed when unrest erupted in response to the government's reduction of fuel subsidies in the summer of 2014,¹³ and then the Houthis joined forces with deposed President Ali Abdullah Saleh to undermine Hadi's transition government. By September 21, 2014, Houthi-Saleh forces took over key buildings in Sanaa and signed a UN-brokered agreement for a unity government with the Hadi Administration. Then, in January 2015, the Houthis seized the Presidential Palace and sought to

⁹ Abdulmalik's succession was reportedly challenged by a longtime close friend of Husayn named Abdullah Ayed al Ruzami, but ultimately this challenge failed. He maintained a role in the organization as late as 2007, but since then his whereabouts remain unknown. [https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/_key/docpreview-s/00-00-02-30-47/Houthi-Rebels-2Doo - Yemen-15-April-2012.pdf](https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/_key/docpreview-s/00-00-02-30-47/Houthi-Rebels-2Doo-Yemen-15-April-2012.pdf)

¹⁰ Saudi forces, primarily aerial, also participated in the last round of the Saada Wars which began in late 2009.

¹¹ <https://www.peaceagreements.org/masterdocument/1434>

¹² <https://ctc.usma.edu/yemens-Houthi-movement-in-the-wake-of-the-arab-spring/>

¹³ The subsidy cuts were implemented as part of an agreement to receive a \$560 million loan from the International Monetary Fund.

press Hadi to make additional concessions which would expand the Houthis' official powers. Hadi resigned rather than comply, and he was placed under house arrest by the Houthi-Saleh forces.

In February 2015, Hadi escaped to Aden and rescinded his resignation. In the following month, he fled to Riyadh as Houthi-Saleh forces closed in on Aden. In response to the Houthi offensive to conquer the rest of Yemen, a Saudi-led military coalition was established to prevent that from happening and to reinstate President Hadi.¹⁴ The coalition supported the successful repulsion of Houthi-Saleh forces from Aden by July 2015, but the progress made by Saudi-led forces would plateau around 2018 and Aden would remain the "interim capital" of the Hadi Government (though President Hadi¹⁵ himself resided in Riyadh and he transferred his powers to a Presidential Leadership Council in 2022). After more than six years of the Saudi-led coalition's counteroffensive against the Houthis, the latter maintain control of around 70% of Yemen's population, including the capital city of Sanaa. The major fronts for Coalition-Houthi fighting as of January 2022 are: Marib, Hodeidah, Shabwa, and Taiz.

Houthi Governance

Investigating the matter of Houthi governance is complicated by the organization's lack of transparency and the considerable gaps between formal and informal structures of power. The Houthis have released a document entitled "National Vision for Building the Modern Yemeni State"¹⁶ which supposedly outlines the organizational vision for the future of Yemen. However, this document appears more geared towards public relations in the West rather than a serious blueprint to reflect Houthi policy or intentions.

The "National Vision" is, like some other long-term plans in the Gulf,¹⁷ geared toward the year 2030. Surprisingly, however, the text describes an aspiration to form a Yemeni state which apparently resembles a liberal democracy. According to the document, the Houthi vision for Yemen includes:

Democratic Elections: "Peaceful transfer of state authorities through free and fair elections shall be the practical embodiment of the democratic approach in Government."¹⁸

Separation of Powers: "We hereby clarify a number of concepts and terms that are embodied in the National Vision, like what is meant by the concept of 'modern', which is used as the desired characteristic of the State of Yemen. In other words, a Yemeni State that rests on respect for the Constitution, Law, and the separation and balance of powers of the three branches of Government: Legislative, Executive and Judicial."¹⁹

Justice, Accountability, and Prosperity: "The concept of 'good governance' means to exercise political power and management of the affairs of society and the development of the country's resources based on the application of standards of accountability, achievement of equality, fairness, efficiency, effectiveness, integrity and transparency, the rule of law, the broadening of participation and combating corruption to ensure economic and social development, which should be applicable to the constitutional institutions of the State, as well filter down to civil society and the private sector."²⁰

Of course, this discourse is disconnected from the reality on the ground in which the Houthis have an unelected hierarchy vested with the organization's true power, suppress dissent by deadly

¹⁴ Other partners in the original coalition included Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain.

¹⁵ In April 2022, shortly before the publication of this report, President Hadi stepped aside and announced that he would be replaced by an 8-person Presidential Council.

¹⁶<http://yemenvision.gov.ye/en/upload/National%20Vision%20For%20The%20Modern%20Yemeni%20State.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en>

¹⁸ "National Vision for Building the Modern Yemeni State," p. 20.

¹⁹ "National Vision for Building the Modern Yemeni State," p. 18.

²⁰ "National Vision for Building the Modern Yemeni State," p. 18.

force,²¹ are not transparent,²² engage in corruption,²³ and appear to be growing more radical and aggressive over time. Despite the fact that the political aspirations set forth in the “National Vision” appear antithetical to Houthi practice,²⁴ some Western analysts appear to have been convinced that the “National Vision” holds promise for Houthi democratization.²⁵

Since Houthi leadership has been passed from Husayn to Badr al-Din to Abdulmalik, it is reasonable to assume that for the foreseeable future the organization will remain in the hands of members of the al-Houthi family. Leadership may be inherited by a member of the family whose name does not end with al-Houthi, like Mahdi al-Mashat who is the Head of the Supreme Political Council (SPC) as well as Abdulmalik’s brother-in-law.²⁶ It is also conceivable that Abdulmalik’s role, given the personalization of the position and the lack of any official bureaucratic title,²⁷ may be adjusted or defined differently in the future.

Marriage and kinship play a critical role in the power structure of the Houthi movement and Yemeni society more generally. Those connected by blood ties to the Houthi organization are often entrusted with powerful positions, either official or unofficial. The logic behind a nepotistic approach is that not only are blood relatives more trustworthy for sensitive roles within the Houthi regime, but also alienating them by failing to provide positions of prestige and power risks distancing members of a well-connected and influential network.

In addition to kinship, the Houthi inner circle is comprised of longstanding supporters who have been involved in the movement for over a decade. Those participating in the group’s initial insurgency from 2004-2010, most of whom come from Saada, Amran, Hajjah, and al-Jawf governorates, are viewed as loyalists who can serve as supervisors (*mushrifin*) to ensure the bureaucracy’s fidelity to the Houthi regime and efforts to carry out its policies.

In taking over sizeable portions of Yemeni territory, including the country’s capital and the vast majority of the Yemeni population, the Houthis did not eliminate existing state structures or bureaucracies and build their own from scratch. In most cases, the Houthis sought to co-opt the existing structures by appointing core loyalists as informal supervisors (*mushrifin*) to oversee the activities of bureaucrats who are ostensibly supporters of the Houthi cause (*mutahawwihin*). This has created a discrepancy between the formal power structure and the informal structure, in which the latter tends to be the dominant force. This arrangement exists all the way down to the neighborhood/village level, on which the *‘aqil* is appointed a “local chairman” who discerns whether an individual’s social credit vis-à-vis the regime warrants allowing him/her access to employment or particular goods (cooking gas at subsidized prices, cars, etc.). Of course, this is not simply a unidirectional system which functions to impose the regime’s will on the local population; it also serves to collect high resolution information and intelligence on the population, which is crucial for heading off any potential challenges to the regime.

²¹ <https://twitter.com/YemeniFatima/status/982709040349360128?s=20>

²² <https://twitter.com/YemeniFatima/status/1096429489544933376?s=20>

²³ <https://twitter.com/Ibrahim4Yemen/status/1271508717499027456?s=20>

²⁴ One could argue that Husayn al-Houthi’s participation in electoral politics in the 1990s provides evidence that there is not inherent doctrinal problem with doing so, but that would be to ignore the way in which context influences interpretation/practice of dogma.

²⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/170535279424/posts/10156624938654425/?d=n>

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/Ndawsari/status/1122745264668839937?s=20>

²⁷ According to “The Houthi Supervisory System”:

Abdulmalik al-Houthi is often referred to as “Leader of the Quranic March” or “Leader of the Revolution” (meaning the 21st September 2014 Revolution). He holds no official position.

https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200617_acaps_yemen_analysis_hub_the_houthi_supervisory_system.pdf

Predictably, there are reports of friction between the formal and informal power structures. Before it had been clearly established that the newly formed supervisory system exerts more power than the formal bureaucracy, the latter sought to resist the former. For example, according to one report on internal Houthi dynamics, “in April 2017, an altercation erupted between the then Minister of International Cooperation, Hisham Sharaf Abdullah, and his supervisor, Houthi loyalist Yahya al-Babili, after the former refused to be placed under supervision.”²⁸ This tension may be expected to increase frictions within the Houthi movement over time, as members of the organization increasingly assume formal roles in the government and create a growing redundancy between the formal and informal system.²⁹

Those living under Houthi rule include both educated urban folks living in Sana’a as well as Yemeni tribes in the more rural regions of Yemen. While some of the local populations support Houthi rule, presumably more prevalent among particular tribal populations and *sayyids* sidelined in the aftermath of 1962, others are wary of the new regime due to its radical ideology, violent repression, poor governance, or the harming of particular interests. A 2019 UN report noted:

The Houthis are facing slightly increasing levels of dissent. During the reporting period, the Panel noted an uptick in the number of local protests and the level of dissent. Incidents included a protest at Sana’a University on 6 October and dissent in a village in rural Dhamar on 26 October. More critically perhaps, some tribes within Sufyan and Khawlan have begun to show signs of rejecting Houthi control.³⁰

A paper published the following year by the UN details clashes between the Houthis and Hajour tribe in Hajjah which caused significant casualties. Despite the Saudi-led coalition’s assistance to the Hajour, including airstrikes and military supplies, after two-months under siege the tribes conceded and then suffered displacement, detention, and extrajudicial killings on a large scale. The report also mentions Houthi assassinations of tribal leaders in the governorates of Amran and Ibb³¹ – presumably for the failure to follow orders from Sanaa. More recently, a 2021 report by ACLED entitled “The myth of stability: Infighting and repression in Houthi-controlled territories” assessed that dissent against Houthi rule is on the rise.³² While educated urban elites and tribal leaders appear to be the two primary sources of opposition to Houthi control, it appears that only the latter have the means or the gall to take up arms against the regime; nonviolent opposition to continued Houthi rule cannot be expected to achieve a great deal against a ruthless regime which does not hesitate to use force against civilians.

The Internal Houthi Power Structure

Beneath the uncontested leadership of Abdulmalik al-Houthi, comparable perhaps to the position of Supreme Leader of Iran in terms of the supra-political and supremely powerful role, there appear to be two emerging centers of power.³³ The first is the “Saada Wing” coalescing around Abdulmalik’s brother-in-law Mahdi al-Mashat who leads the SPC. This core of Houthi leadership is viewed as most

²⁸https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/42790/Andrea%20Carboni%20Essays%20on%20Political%20Elites%20and%20Violence%20in%20Changing%20Political%20Orders%20of%20Middle%20East%20and%20Africa_Thesis_FINAL_Carboni.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

²⁹https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Talking%20to%20the%20Houthis_%20How%20Europeans%20can%20promote%20peace%20in%20Yemen%20-%20European%20Council%20on%20Foreign%20Relations.pdf

³⁰ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/S_2019_83_E.pdf

³¹<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/%5BEN%5DLetter%20dated%2027%20January%202020%20from%20the%20Panel%20of%20Experts%20on%20Yemen%20addressed%20to%20the%20President%20of%20the%20Security%20Council%20-%20Final%20report%20of%20the%20Panel%20of%20Experts%20on%20Yemen%20%28S-2020-70%29.pdf>

³² <https://acleddata.com/2021/02/09/the-myth-of-stability-infighting-and-repression-in-houthi-controlled-territories/>

³³ <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/324258>

closely connected to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Hezbollah, and has been described as “extremely secretive” and “paranoid.” The second is the “Military Wing” led Abdulmalik’s cousin Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, who heads the SRC, and Chief of Houthi Military Intelligence Abdullah “Abu Ali” al-Hakim. According to Yemen researcher Sama’a Al-Hamdani, “evidence of the breakdown in internal Houthi dynamics can be found in recent credible reports of mounting tensions between Mahdi al-Mashat, [Saleh Ali] Sammad’s replacement, and Mohammed al-Houthi, head of the Revolutionary Committee, and allegations that Houthi attempted to assassinate Mashat.” Al-Hamdani went so far as to suggest that the intelligence needed to carry out the assassination of former SPC President Saleh al-Samad may have been provided by members of a competing faction of the Houthi movement.³⁴

Beyond any ideological or strategic divisions that may exist, the rivalry among Houthi factions is undoubtedly based, in part, on a competition for control of institutions and financial resources. Competition between elites for ill-gotten gains takes place in the black market, in the upper echelons of the military, and even spills over into the humanitarian sector and beyond. One example provided by the European Council on Foreign Relations is the clash between Abdulmalik’s uncle Interior Minister Abdulkarim al-Houthi and SPC President al-Mashat over the appointment of 44 police directors in April 2020.³⁵ Another public intra-Houthi dispute involved a disagreement between Education Minister Yahya al-Houthi and head of the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (SCMCHA) Ahmed Hamid: After al-Houthi’s overt condemnation of Hamid’s attempt to levy a 2% “tax” on international assistance to Houthi-controlled areas, Hamid reversed course.³⁶

The Houthi mechanism for governance relies heavily on informal positions and relationships/partnerships. As mentioned previously, blood relations and long-term demonstrations of loyalty are two key metrics for determining an individual’s fitness for the Houthi inner circle. Although numerous lists have been compiled regarding the top Houthi officials, much about the senior decision-making process and advising remains concealed. The opacity of the organization may promote rifts and suspicion between the different wings of the organization, yet that same quality makes it impossible to confirm or disprove the reported organizational dynamics with any degree of confidence.³⁷

Houthi National Security

Military

The informal “supervisory” system, which was mentioned earlier as a means to ensure loyalty throughout the bureaucracy, extends into the military as well. According to a report by ACAPS, the “informal system includes the ‘frontline supervisor’ (*mushrif al-jabahah*), a Houthi loyalist in charge of the units fighting on the frontlines, and the ‘military supervisor’ (*mushrif askari*) who is, instead, the Houthi military [supervisor] responsible for the whole governorate.”³⁸ The formal structure of the Army has been co-opted rather than dramatically altered by the Houthis, with the governorate-level commanders now reporting to the Jihad Office which, in turn, reports directly to Abdulmalik al-Houthi.

³⁴ <https://www.lawfareblog.com/understanding-houthi-faction-yemen>

³⁵ <https://ecfr.eu/publication/talking-to-the-houthis-how-europeans-can-promote-peace-in-yemen/>

³⁶ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/corruption-reports-divide-yemens-houthis>

³⁷ <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/324258>

³⁸ https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200617_acaps_yemen_analysis_hub_the_houthi_supervisory_system.pdf

Security Services

In contrast to the military, the domestic intelligence and security agencies known as the National Security Bureau and the Political Security Office were reorganized in August 2019 and merged into a single agency known as the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS). The SIS is led by former Deputy Minister of Interior Abdulhakim al-Khaywani and the organization's main function is to look outside the Houthi movement for potential threats.³⁹ While open-source information about al-Khaywani is scarce, *al-Arabiya* reported in 2017 that he is "believed to have been an unemployed man from Saada but now has more medals than the [Houthis'] minister of interior."⁴⁰ Another research paper noted that after al-Khaywani was appointed as a "supervisor" to the interior ministry, he "quickly acquired a higher military rank than the minister he was supposed to supervise, Muhammad Abdullah al-Qawsi."⁴¹ Major General Abdul Qadir al-Shami, who served prior as the head of the Political Security Office, currently serves as al-Khaywani's deputy. Both al-Khaywani and al-Shami are under U.S. sanctions.⁴²



Chief of the Houthi Security and Intelligence Service Abdulhakim al-Khaywani

A second new security apparatus established by the Houthis, likely with external assistance, is the Preventative Security (PS) force. It reports directly to Abdulmalik al-Houthi, and it is reportedly viewed as the "Saada Wing's" primary counterintelligence agency.⁴³ An article in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, explained that Abdulmalik "formed this security force in his hometown of Saada. It was trained by Iranian intelligence and the 'Hezbollah', before its activity expanded to reach all provinces, including the capital Sanaa."⁴⁴ According to a UN report, PS's leader is "one of the most powerful Houthi figures," though his identity was not disclosed in the publicly available version of the report.

PS is tasked with "monitoring the Houthi movement and protecting it from infiltrations." Its other responsibilities include reviewing "supervisor" reports, ensuring that Houthi fighters do not flee the frontlines or steal weaponry, mediating internal conflicts within Houthi forces, and arresting Houthi

³⁹ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/S_2020_326_E.pdf

⁴⁰ <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2017/03/12/In-Yemen-Houthi-chanter-becomes-military-commander->

⁴¹ https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/42790/Andrea%20Carboni%20Essays%20on%20Political%20Elites%20and%20Violence%20in%20Changing%20Political%20Orders%20of%20Middle%20East%20and%20Africa_Thesis_FINAL_Carboni.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

⁴² <https://ye.usembassy.gov/treasury-sanctions-serious-human-rights-abusers-on-international-human-rights-day/>

⁴³ <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/324258>

⁴⁴ <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/1122641/%E2%80%98preventative%E2%80%99-security-houthis%E2%80%99-secret-weapon>

officials who betray the organization's cause. A CNN report indicated that PS also oversees technology transfers to⁴⁵ and from Tehran.⁴⁶

The very existence of PS has been publicly denied by Houthi officials and the agency remains outside of official state structures. In practice, however, PS is believed to be a 3,000-man strong, multitask secret security force, which includes experts in technology and communications, special operations, recruitment and advocacy, and propaganda. One of its first high profile missions was, reportedly, the 2017 assassination of former President of Yemen turned Houthi partner Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Similarly, because it is a clandestine organization little is known about Houthi Military Intelligence (MI), but there is considerable reporting on Chief of Houthi MI Abdullah "Abu Ali" al-Hakim. He is considered to be among the most powerful people in the Houthi leadership constellation, was a chief strategist of the Houthi takeover of Sanaa, and co-leads the "military wing" within the Houthi movement. According to renowned Houthi expert Marieke Brandt, "Because of [al-Hakim's] powerful position and his swift strategic moves, some people likened him to the queen piece in a chess game."⁴⁷ In addition to his brilliance, "Abu Ali" is well-known for his falling out with numerous other Houthi commanders, including Abdulmalik al-Houthi, and his disdain for more moderate, consensus and politically-oriented members of the movement. For his role in the Yemeni conflict, al-Hakim is currently sanctioned in the U.S., UK, and elsewhere.⁴⁸



According to a report by the Jamestown Foundation,⁴⁹ the Houthis competitive advantage in regards to MI is its extensive human intelligence (HUMINT) network. MI's pool of informants apparently extends across Yemen and into southern Saudi Arabia, and they are motivated by a variety of factors including ideological solidarity and material gain. This provides Houthi leaders with access to valuable information regarding troop movements, arms, and supplies.

⁴⁵ Houthi technology transfers to Tehran do not include indigenous technology, rather the transfer of weapons captured by the Houthis on the battlefield which are then sent to Iran for study.

⁴⁶ <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/02/middleeast/yemen-lost-us-arms/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.slow-journalism.com/delayed-gratification-magazine/why-yemens-civil-war-is-personal-for-mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabias-involvement-in-yemen-explained>

⁴⁸ <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2693.aspx>;

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/976083/Yemen.pdf; <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32017D0634&locale=ga>.

⁴⁹ <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-the-houthi-art-of-war-why-they-keep-winning-in-yemen/>

Finally, the Houthis established an internal security organization entitled “Zainabiyat” which is comprised of women and intended to target women. According to the UN Panel of experts, the responsibilities of the Zainabiyat include “searching women and houses, indoctrinating women and maintaining order in female prisons.” Beyond their official responsibilities, members of the Zainabiyat have allegedly “aided and abetted the commission of rape by holding down women and engaged in torture of women, including during interrogations.” The women recruited to this organization are primarily from *sada* families. Those women targeted by the Zainabiyat include politically engaged dissenters or protestors who are then accused of trumped up charges of prostitution, treason, spying etc.⁵⁰

Given the multiple factions within the Houthi organization as well as the movement’s opacity, it is difficult to distill any clear security concept. Presumably, like all authoritarian regimes, the Houthis prioritize regime survival above all else. Second to that, the organization prioritizes its battlefield success in the Yemeni civil war – which has both domestic and regional components. State-building, economic prosperity, and other issues of governance appear to be low priorities, with the exception of establishing mechanisms for domestic repression and indoctrination in order to ensure the population’s obedience and a steady supply of fighters for the war effort.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to understand certain aspects of the Houthi way of war. In order to ensure a steady supply of recruits, the Houthis enforce conscription quotas on the regions under its control. A 2019 report on Yemen estimated the Houthi military at 180,000-200,000 fighters with access to a varied range of weaponry.⁵¹ In addition, the educational curriculum instituted by Houthi Education Minister and Abdulmalik’s half-brother Yahia al-Houthi works to radicalize the youth under their control, and facilitate the recruitment of child soldiers (under the age of 18) of which they have allegedly already drafted between 10,000-30,000.⁵²

Michael Knight’s 2018 article “The Houthi War Machine: From Guerilla War to State Capture”⁵³ also provides some valuable insights. To mitigate the impact of coalition air superiority, the Houthis operate under what Knights refers to as a “very low force-to-space ratio.” He explains:

In defense of a trench complex, a single fighter will be expected to move from position to position, firing a machine-gun in one, a sniper rifle in another, and a B-10 recoilless rifle, medium mortar, or even an anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) in a third. Each fighter might have a one- to three-kilometer front to defend, and will be expected to defend the area successfully or die trying. In a 15-kilometer sector, there will thus be a thin outpost screen of highly determined and quite skilled marksmen...Behind this screen will be a pool of substitutes able to move forward quickly, not carrying weapons, to replace frontline fighters.⁵⁴

Another approach to mitigate their enemies’ aerial superiority, is the Houthis’ use of facilities which cannot legally be targeted as command and logistics centers, including hospitals and other critical civilian infrastructure.

According to the Jamestown Foundation report on the Houthi military, the organizational culture places considerable weight on bottom-up learning. This allows for quick adaptation to battlefield conditions, which is an advantageous quality not present in the military culture of most Arab states.⁵⁵ In addition, contrasting with the political leadership which is centered around the al-Houthi

⁵⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/2020-09-09-report.pdf>

⁵¹ <https://www.dw.com/en/yemens-houthi-rebels-who-are-they-and-what-do-they-want/a-50667558>

⁵² <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/02/13/Terrorism-Houthis-recruited-more-than-10-000-children-in-Yemen-since-2014-Report>; <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/yemens-houthis-recruit-30-000-child-soldiers-minister/1528489>

⁵³ <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/CTC-SENTINEL-092018.pdf>

⁵⁴ <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/CTC-SENTINEL-092018.pdf>

⁵⁵ According to Ken Pollack, this a key reason that NSAs have become more effective militaries than states in the Arab world.

family, the Houthi armed forces are reported to be fairly meritocratic and “open to those who possess the skills and talent that the group and their allies require.”⁵⁶

The nearly continuous fighting since 2004 has witnessed a dramatic improvement in Houthi military capabilities which is attributable to three key factors. First, the group has gained considerable combat experience after fighting for over 13 years (2004-2010, 2014-Present). Second, the Houthi partnership with Ali Abdullah Saleh and his loyalists in the military from 2014-17⁵⁷ meant that the Houthi tribal-based militia was “grafted on to, and allied with, a professionally trained military from elements of the former Yemeni Armed Forces.”⁵⁸ Presumably this led to the diffusion of professional expertise among the paramilitary forces. Third, according to a 2018 UN report, the end of the alliance with Saleh provided the Houthis an impetus to look for additional partners so as to offset the collapse of the Houthi-Saleh partnership; Iran stepped into that role by expanding its training and equipment of Houthi forces.

The technological and tactical inferiority of the Houthis when compared with their GOY and Saudi adversaries was considerable during the Saada Wars from 2004-2010. According to a 2010 RAND Corporation report on the subject, the Houthis’ “regional units do not currently have the capacity to execute coordinated operations”⁵⁹ and their weaponry consisted of “assault rifles, medium machine guns, and RPGs with diverse munitions...12.7-mm heavy machine guns, 90-mm recoilless rifles, and light (23-mm) antiaircraft cannons converted for antipersonnel or antivehicle use.”⁶⁰ In contrast, since 2017 the Houthis have been supplied by Iran (and may even be developing the capacity to produce locally) far more sophisticated weapons than the RPGs and machine guns they had only one decade ago – including advanced attack UAVs and cruise missiles.⁶¹ The group has also demonstrated the capacity to integrate this precision weaponry into coordinated attacks on adversaries based on real-time intelligence, as was evident in their assassination of Yemen’s Chief of Military Intelligence⁶² and near-misses targeting the GOY’s chief of staff of the armed forces⁶³ and the entire GOY Cabinet.⁶⁴

In some cases, Iran’s weapon shipments to the Houthis have been seized before delivery⁶⁵ which provides ample evidence that Houthi claims of independent, domestic production are overblown. At the same time, several reports have been published recently indicating significant evidence of a nascent Houthi UAV industry.⁶⁶

Yet, despite their impressive leaps in terms of weaponry and organizational capability, the Houthis are significantly less capable in the offensive realm than they are in the defensive realm. This is evident in their stalling efforts to conquer Marib which necessitated that they take enemy defensive positions while under attack from enemy airpower.

⁵⁶ <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-the-houthi-art-of-war-why-they-keep-winning-in-yemen/>

⁵⁷ After gradually easing Saleh loyalists out of key positions in order to increase their own control, the Houthis broke with Saleh in 2017 and had the former President of Yemen assassinated.

⁵⁸ <http://www.undocs.org/en/S/2018/594>

⁵⁹ Rand, 197.

⁶⁰ Rand, 200.

⁶¹ <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/03/houthi-rebels-unveil-host-of-weaponry.html>

⁶² <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/yemeni-military-intelligence-chief-dies-of-wounds/1363350>

⁶³ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1680566/middle-east>

⁶⁴ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2021/02/09/rockets-over-yemen-inside-the-houthis-botched-attack-on-aden-airport/>

⁶⁵ <https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/centcom-weapons-shipment-from-iran-seized-in-arabian-sea-was-on-the-way-to-houthi-rebels-in-yemen-1.619374>

⁶⁶ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/the-houthis-have-built-their-own-drone-industry-in-yemen-1.1032847>; https://www.conflictarm.com/download-file/?report_id=3185&file_id=3189.

Houthi Foreign Policy

Given the generally paranoid and conspiratorial worldview espoused by the Houthi leadership, they are wary of engaging the international community as they believe it is hostile and dominated by their American and Israeli enemies. Thus, they have fairly limited international relations beyond partnerships with members of the Iran-led “axis of resistance” (Iran, Hezbollah, Syria). While much of the cooperation between Sanaa and the axis is presumably covert, steps taken in recent years indicate that ties are expanding from covert smuggling, funding, and training to political-diplomatic support.⁶⁷

Houthi ambitions and means to build foreign relations are limited. The primary aims of their approach to the international arena appear to be: 1) establishing partnerships with likeminded entities in order to cooperate in the enhancement of military/security capabilities, 2) earning as much domestic and international legitimacy as possible through recognition from additional states, 3) intensifying pressure on the Saudi-led coalition to end its campaign in Yemen due to reputational costs.

To the extent that it exists, the Houthis’ international diplomacy is run largely by the group’s longtime spokesman Mohammed Abdelsalam⁶⁸ who serves as the organization’s de facto foreign minister and chief negotiator. Proof of Abdelsalam’s senior stature can be found in the high-level meetings he convenes with foreign leaders (of the limited number willing to meet with Houthi officials), including Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah,⁶⁹ Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei,⁷⁰ then Foreign Minister of Iran Javad Zarif, U.S. Envoy to Yemen Timothy Lenderking, and then UK Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt.⁷¹ It is likely that the Houthi negotiating team is instructed, trained, and advised by Hezbollah.⁷²

The relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Houthis has grown consistently stronger in recent years, but its precise contours remain unclear. It would appear that the Houthis need Iran, or the support of Iran-backed groups, for training, advanced weaponry and funding that cannot be acquired elsewhere. In contrast, Tehran is not entirely beholden to the Houthis for gaining leverage over Saudi Arabia – it has other proxies or potential partners that it can utilize to that end. Assuming this imbalance informs the power dynamic, the Iran-Houthi relationship is one of patron-client. But while patronage generally has significant limitations in terms of the influence it earns, the ideological affinity between the two likely enhances the Islamic Republic’s clout in Sanaa. After all, based on public statements by leading Houthi officials, it would be reasonable to assume that the Houthis seek to replicate major aspects of the Islamic Republic and adapt them to the Yemeni context. Yet, the answer to the question of “how much” influence Iran exerts over the Houthis remains elusive as its limits are only evident when their interests starkly diverge and even then it is difficult to quantify.

Beyond Iran, the Houthis have sought to cultivate relations with countries that are either neutral or hostile to the U.S.-led order so that they may serve as useful mediators to advance Houthi interests.

⁶⁷ In August 2019, the Houthis appointed an ambassador, Ibrahim Mohamed al-Dailami, to represent the organization in Tehran. In October 2020, Iran appointed IRGC-QF official Hassan Irlu to serve as its ambassador in Sanaa; though Irlu’s past is shadowy, it is reported that in previous decades he trained Hezbollah on anti-aircraft weaponry. In November 2020, reportedly under pressure from Iran, Damascus recognized Houthi Ambassador to Syria Abdullah Sabri.

⁶⁸ <https://twitter.com/abdusalamsalah>

⁶⁹ https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_79.pdf;

https://twitter.com/Marwa_Osman/status/1030917939631927297?s=20

⁷⁰ <https://twitter.com/A7medJa7af/status/1161304292864737280?s=20>

⁷¹ <https://twitter.com/ElanaGulf/status/1101585033045962753?s=20>

⁷² Also mentioned

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/12/yemen-national-chaos-local-order> p. 32

For example, because Oman is a neutral party to the Yemeni civil war, the Houthis view Muscat as a useful mediator and a convenient and safe host country for diplomatic meetings with counterparts from Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and elsewhere.⁷³ Beyond diplomacy, Oman appears to function as a useful hub for Houthi activity, as noted in a 2017 Chatham House report, “Western and other officials and intelligence analysts believe that at least some of the illicit goods, weapons, technology and cash flowing into Yemen first pass through neighbouring Oman.”⁷⁴ Also, Russia and the Houthis have developed limited ties which allowed for occasional visits by Houthi delegations to Moscow.⁷⁵ Yet this dialogue has not translated into the Kremlin taking on any serious role or pro-Houthi positions with respect to Yemen, and recently Russian policy appears to have taken a turn against the Houthis. For years Moscow staked out a position against the designation of the Houthis as a terrorist group, but this calculus changed in February 2022 amid the invasion of Ukraine: in what appears to have been part of a “grand bargain” at the UN, Moscow voted in favor of a Security Council resolution imposing an arms embargo on the Houthis in its entirety and labeled the Houthis as a terrorist group for the first time.⁷⁶

While hostility to the U.S. has remained an ideological pillar of the Houthi movement since even before it officially adopted the “death to America, death to Israel” chant in 2002, the militia’s actual hostile engagements with the U.S. have been fairly limited. In 2015, they kidnapped American contractors John Hamen and Mark McAlister in Yemen, and murdered the former before releasing the latter.⁷⁷ The following year, the group also launched anti-ship missiles against U.S. naval forces off the coast of Yemen but those strikes were unsuccessful and were met with a firm response. Since then, attacks on the U.S. have been confined to strikes on unmanned assets as the Houthis appear to prioritize their fight against the Saudi-led coalition.

Despite the Houthis’ fiery anti-American rhetoric, a recent *Foreign Policy* article disclosed that the U.S. military was actually cooperating with the Houthis against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) until 2015.⁷⁸ This was a contributing factor to the outrage expressed by then-CENTCOM commander and current U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin at the outset of the Saudi anti-Houthi campaign in 2015.

As for what the Houthis aim to achieve through internationally-brokered negotiations with the Saudi-led coalition, a document they submitted to the UN in April 2020 represents what Yemen researcher Elana Delozier calls a “Houthi wish list.”⁷⁹ As Delozier explains, the document lays out the need to:

- (1) Implement a complete ceasefire,
- (2) end the foreign presence in Yemen,
- (3) establish “brotherly relations” with Saudi Arabia,
- (4) end the coalition’s air, sea, and land blockade of Yemen and end the “foreign presence” for inspecting Yemen’s ports,
- (5) demilitarize the Yemen-Saudi border crossings,

⁷³https://ecfr.eu/publication/talking_to_the_houthis_how_europeans_can_promote_peace_in_yemen/

⁷⁴ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/12/yemen-national-chaos-local-order>

⁷⁵ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-growing-ties-iran-aligned-militia-groups>:
<https://twitter.com/narrabyee/status/1154038626537263109?s=20>

⁷⁶<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2033376/middle-eas>

⁷⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/a488e2b9b9be4503abf3782ae4617922>

⁷⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/16/lloyd-austin-isnt-who-you-think-he-is/>

⁷⁹ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthis-release-their-wish-list-ending-yemen-war>

- (6) the coalition (Saudi Arabia) should pay the salaries of public servants in Yemen for the next decade until the economy recovers,
- (7) the coalition (Saudi Arabia) should compensate Yemenis for any damage caused by the coalition to infrastructure, source of income, and personal harm such as injury or death,
- (8) launch intra-Yemeni peace talks through the UN,
- (9) refer any agreed upon intra-Yemeni peace agreement to a national referendum.

This document, given its far-reaching demands, may reflect one of three possible realities: the Houthis are not seriously interested in reaching a negotiated settlement but do not want to be seen as the spoilers and so they have countered a Saudi proposal with non-starters; the Houthis believe they are winning the war and they intend to dictate the Saudi-led coalition's terms of surrender; or this is an opening negotiating position to extract concessions from the Saudis but the Houthis will ultimately prove willing to compromise. Though it would be foolhardy to claim any deep insight into Houthi negotiating strategy given the opacity of the organization, the expansionist and uncompromising tendencies of the organization make the first answer appears most likely.

While the Houthis publicly call for a united Yemen, this prospect appears increasingly distant. On the military track, it appears improbable that the Houthis could take, let alone hold, southern Yemen which includes tens of thousands of trained and armed soldiers motivated by southern separatist and/or salafi belief. On the diplomatic track, it is difficult to envision a scenario in which the Houthis opt to become partners in a power-sharing government of Yemen which requires them to compromise and maneuver politically (rather than exercising nearly absolute power as they do now) to advance political aims. This may explain why, according to ECFR, the Houthis "have shown decreasing interest in Aden and neighbouring governorates since they failed in their attempt to take over these areas in 2015. The positioning of their troops suggests that the Houthis have limited interest in expanding into southern Yemen." Partition of Yemen between the north and south appears more likely than the country's reunification by papering over the regional and sectarian fissures exacerbated by years of war.

The Humanitarian and Economic Situation Under Houthi Rule

The situation in Yemen is often classified as the "world's worst humanitarian crisis."⁸⁰ Since the start of the civil war in 2014, over 110,000 Yemenis have been killed, including upwards of 12,000 civilians.⁸¹ In frontline governorates, like Marib, al-Jawf, and Saada, over 4% of the adult male population has been killed as a direct result of the war.

But even for those who have escaped direct harm as a result of the conflict, living conditions have deteriorated and the economic situation is increasingly precarious. The UN assesses that upwards of 20 million people require some form of international aid, and nearly 8 million Yemenis "do not know where their next meal is coming from."⁸² The Sanaa Center reports that the GDP per capita of what was already the Arab world's poorest country declined by almost 50% in just four years, sinking from \$3,577 in 2015 to US\$1,950 in 2019.⁸³ In parallel, since the start of the conflict, the UN estimates that food prices have increased by 150%.⁸⁴ But not all sectors of Yemeni society are growing poorer,

⁸⁰ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1843591/middle-east>

The degree to which this is true is subject to debate, as the Yemeni conflict's death toll of 110,000 is only one quarter of that of the civil war in Syria.

⁸¹ https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_79.pdf

⁸² According to the UN, the five largest donors to the Yemen Humanitarian response plan are Saudi Arabia, the U.S., UAE, UK, and Germany. <https://gho.unocha.org/yemen>

⁸³ <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11628>

⁸⁴ <https://gho.unocha.org/yemen>

rather the inequality between the county's few rich and poor masses is growing as a result of the wartime economy.

Interestingly despite the fighting taking place on multiple fronts due to the civil war, the Yemeni economy is fairly unified and trade continues to flow between different areas. While it can be difficult to ship goods into Yemen, transporting them once they have entered the country is far less complicated and simply an issue of paying "transport fees" at numerous military checkpoints which tend to add on about 15% to the final price. For that reason, the Yemeni consumer market tends to move in concert, though the prices for wheat, flour, and diesel are usually higher on average in Houthi-controlled areas. According to one merchant interviewed in a Chatham House report, it takes around 48-72 hours between the purchase of electronics in Dubai, UAE until they arrive in Sanaa by truck.⁸⁵ Yet, this "free market" is not limited to civilian items, as even military items are sold and shipped across the frontlines on a regular basis⁸⁶ – usually from the coalition to the Houthis, but also from the Houthis to the coalition at a lesser volume – which has caused the price of ammunition to drop since the start of the civil war.⁸⁷

Several key pillars of the Yemeni economy have declined as a result the Covid-19 crisis. As of 2019, remittances to Yemen stood at nearly \$4 billion, or 13% of the Yemeni economy, but after the outbreak of the pandemic the flow of funds into Yemen is believed to have shrunk dramatically and the country's poorest households suffered an estimated decline in income of over 20%.⁸⁸

The largest source of income for the Houthi Government is the taxation of the approximately 20 million Yemenis under its control. As of 2017, it was estimated that the Houthi-Saleh alliance extracted about \$30 million/month from collecting customs,⁸⁹ which is roughly equal to the monthly support Iran provides to the Houthis via oil shipments.⁹⁰ In addition to the standard duties collected by the Houthi regime, in 2020 SPC President Mehdi al-Mashat signed into law a new regulation expanding the scope of the *khums* ("one-fifth" or 20%) tax on transactions taking place within Yemen and established a legal framework which allows those funds collected to be channeled to *sada*, or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. The recent tax legislation enshrines preferable treatment to *sada*, including the al-Houthi family, and provides further evidence – beyond rhetoric – that the Houthis intend to restore that segment of society's status as the privileged class that it was during the time of the Imamate (pre-1962). A report by the Sanaa Center noted the way in which Houthi co-optation of the *khums* and its allocation to state "slush funds" resembles the Islamic Republic's *bonyads*, or "foundations," controlled by the Supreme Leader without any oversight or

⁸⁵ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/12/yemen-national-chaos-local-order-0/3-resources-revenue-and-incentives-spoil>

⁸⁶ According to a 2018 report from the Sanaa Center: "The ease with which weapons are being transferred from Yemen's eastern governorates, particularly al-Mahra and Shabwa, to Houthi-controlled areas via al-Bayda or Marib governorates is testament to the fact that "business as usual" continues with regard to weapons smuggling. As long as each party along the way is paid their share – from arms dealers to those driving the trucks and individuals stationed along the road manning the checkpoints – then arms sales run smoothly, no matter where those arms are destined."

<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/6614>

⁸⁷ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/12/yemen-national-chaos-local-order-0/3-resources-revenue-and-incentives-spoil>

⁸⁸ <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/model-impact-falling-remittances-amid-covid-19-yemens-war-torn-economy>

⁸⁹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/12/yemen-national-chaos-local-order-0/3-resources-revenue-and-incentives-spoil>

collect import taxes at Hodeida and al-Salif ports, and at a checkpoint in Dhamar province through which nearly all of the country's imports pass

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/damning-report-un-panel-details-war-economy-yemen>

⁹⁰ <https://iranintl.com/en/iran-in-brief/israel-has-targeted-least-dozen-ships-carrying-iranian-oil-syria>

accountability.⁹¹ A significant portion of the funds accrued by the Houthis is allocated toward their war effort, as the Panel of Experts on Yemen estimated that at least \$1.8 billion was diverted by the Houthis from legitimate purposes to fund their war effort in 2019.⁹²

The Houthi leadership is also reported to control key smuggling routes, especially for fuel sold to the state or on the black market, and this is believed to provide billions of dollars in revenue.⁹³ According to a Sanaa Center report on the black market and corruption in Yemen, in many cases officials' business interests supersede their affiliation in the civil war: "Alleged collusion between Houthi-affiliated importers and officials allied with the internationally recognized Yemeni government indicates patronage networks that potentially cross the frontlines of the war themselves."⁹⁴ Some Yemen experts have even suggested that the Houthis manufacture fuel crises in order to maximize the profits from their fuel sales.⁹⁵

Houthi Ideology and Means to Disseminate and Enforce It

The Houthis, in particular Husayn and his successor Abdulmalik, have developed and promoted a political-religious ideology that is based on pillars of anti-Western sentiment, Shia (Zaydi) revolutionary activism, and a ruling class of *sada*. The belief system espouses the idea that Muslims are in a "soft war" with the West over culture and values, and that the U.S.-led order is irredeemably hostile to Islam. The internationally recognized Government of Yemen, led by Saleh and then Hadi, was viewed as a co-conspirator with Washington in the "War on Terror" and therefore the principle of *khuruj* which mandates a rebellion against unjust leaders was invoked. The religious doctrines of Shiism place an emphasis on leadership's descent from the Prophet Muhammad, and so the government which the Houthis seek to establish is one which allows for *sada* rule.

Houthi governance thus far appears to enforce radical religious norms and punish those who deviate from them. For example, in April 2021, the Houthis reportedly kidnapped Yemeni model Entesar Hammadi from the streets of Sanaa, allegedly for being photographed without a *hijab* and then posting the photos online.⁹⁶ More recently, the group has started to enforce a requirement that women be accompanied by a male guardian in public or must have the male guardian's written permission when traveling.⁹⁷ Liberal women and female political dissidents are especially targeted by the regime, often accused of trumped up charges and while in custody they are subject to sexual harassment and even rape.

Children are also targeted by the Houthi system of governance to ensure that they not only comply with but actively contribute to the organization. In 2014-15, almost immediately after taking Sanaa, the Houthis established a committee to revise the educational curricula to include indoctrination with their own radical ideology.⁹⁸ This also explains why a central figure in the Houthi movement, Yahya al-Houthi, was seemingly "relegated" to the Ministry of Education – because it is in fact a key role. The Houthi focus on indoctrinating the next generation of Yemenis should not come as a surprise to those who are aware of the organization's origins, which include running summer camps and infiltrating schools in the Saada Province. Many of those who attended Believing Youth events

⁹¹ <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11628>

⁹² <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/final-report-panel-experts-yemen-s202179-enar>

⁹³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/27/yemen-coalitions-blocking-aid-fuel-endangers-civilians>

⁹⁴ <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/6614>

⁹⁵ <https://twitter.com/Ndawsari/status/1275160980671148034?s=20>

⁹⁶ https://www.arabnews.jp/en/middle-east/article_43546/

⁹⁷ <https://twitter.com/Alsakaniali/status/1514794717514371076?s=20&t=WTgYmEXMoFqJ4Ap6MJEQlg>

⁹⁸ <https://ecfr.eu/publication/talking-to-the-houthis-how-europeans-can-promote-peace-in-yemen/>

decades ago, like Chief of Military Intelligence Abdullah “Abu Ali” al-Hakim, is now among the movement’s most fervent supporters and senior officials.

In addition to the educational system run by the Houthis, the organization has established and co-opted a number of media outlets to present its narrative in the county, region, and around the world. The most notable of these is the satellite television station *al-Masirah* which is based in Beirut, Lebanon.⁹⁹ The location of the Houthi regime’s key mouthpiece outside of Yemen hardly seems like a coincidental decision but likely speaks to the incredible influence that Hezbollah has over how the Houthis engage the international arena. The messaging and aesthetics of *al-Masirah*’s products indicate a highly sophisticated media team¹⁰⁰ is supporting the channel’s work. Given the Houthis’ ties to the “axis of resistance,” Iranian and Hezbollah channels and websites also parrot Houthi talking points.

The Houthi Approach to Israel

The Houthi approach to Israel is extremely hostile on the ideological and rhetorical levels. On the operational level, the Houthis appear somewhat more cautious for a variety of possible reasons including: Israeli deterrence, Houthi prioritization of ongoing conflict against the coalition, Houthis awaiting an opportune moment, lack of capabilities to launch an attack of any great significance, or general Houthi disinterest in moving from rhetoric to direct conflict. Yet, because it is unclear why the Houthis have not yet attacked Israel, Israel will have a difficult time monitoring indicators that might foreshadow an impending decision to attack.

Given the opacity of Houthi decision-making and the open question of the group’s prioritization of operationalizing hostility toward Israel, Israel would be well served to monitor the group’s capabilities rather than intentions. Should an agreement to end the ongoing Yemeni civil war be reached, the Houthi “resistance” may shift focus to Israel in order to justify military mobilization, repressive policies, and poor quality of life in Houthi-controlled territory. The prospect of a Houthi strike poses a dilemma for Israeli decision-makers in terms of how to reach a critical balance between mitigating potential risks and avoiding inadvertently/unnecessarily instigating a conflict against a determined and radical foe with considerable battlefield experience, a low bar for victory, and located in a faraway and highly complex conflict zone.

Israel should also be cognizant of indirect challenges that the Houthi threat can pose to its national security. The knowledge produced by Houthi “testing” of Iranian weapons systems against Saudi Arabia’s Western-supplied platforms may be relayed to Hezbollah. Houthi military industries may also begin to supply advanced munitions developed by Iran to Israel’s enemies, particularly along its southern front.

Any realistic solution to the Yemeni civil war – reunification or partition – is unlikely to significantly diminish the Houthi threat to Israel and may actually serve to increase it. Nor do developments within Yemen indicate a high likelihood of deposing the Houthi regime in the near future; the increase of sporadic resistance against the Houthis is unlikely to outmatch the multilayered and ideologically committed cadres of intelligence and security services dedicated to ensuring the regime’s survival. Therefore, the rise of the Houthis should be viewed as a long-term challenge for Israel.

Ari Heistein is a Non-Resident Fellow at Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). His main areas of focus include U.S. foreign policy and Yemen.

⁹⁹ <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-07-ch-5-yemen>

¹⁰⁰ This team is likely connected to and/or trained by personnel at Hezbollah’s media channel *al-Manar*.