

## Facilitators and Strategic Interests in Yemen's Multifaceted Proxy War

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The ongoing conflict in Yemen, which erupted into full-scale warfare in 2015, represents one of the most devastating humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century. What began as a domestic political struggle has evolved into a multifaceted proxy war, drawing in regional powers and international actors through an intricate network of support systems, financial channels and strategic alliances. The use of armed force has caused untold human suffering and loss of civilian life, with no real accountability to date.

The Yemen war features a sophisticated web of state and non-state actors. In the hope that it may assist those considering possible accountability for core international crimes committed, this policy brief seeks to give a concise overview of the main actors operating within Yemen – including the Houthis (Section 2. below), the internationally recognized government ('IRG') (Section 3.), the Southern Transitional Council ('STC') (Section 4.), and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (Section 5.) – as well as Iran (Section 6.). I will also make numerous references to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates ('UAE'), the United States ('US') and the United Kingdom ('UK') as they have played important roles.

### 1. The Modern Multipolar Conflict in Brief

The roots of Yemen's modern multipolar conflict lie in large part, but not exclusively,<sup>1</sup> in the failed political transition following the 2011 Arab Spring protests that ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh after 33 years in power.<sup>2</sup> His successor, Abd-Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, inherited a nation struggling with corruption, unemployment, food insecurity and separatist movements.<sup>3</sup> The Houthis, a *Shi'ah* group from northern Yemen, opposed President Saleh for supporting the invasion of the US in Iraq. But, upon President Saleh's resignation, the Houthis surprisingly allied with him, seized the capital Sanaa and much of northern Yemen.<sup>4</sup> The Houthis demanded a new government and economic reforms, eventually forcing Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia.

In 2012, former President Saleh became the President again. This prompted Saudi Arabia and a coalition of Gulf states<sup>5</sup> to intervene in March 2015 with airstrikes on Yemen, viewing the Houthis as an Iranian proxy force.<sup>6</sup> The conflict became increasingly complex with mul-

tiples factions: the Houthis (backed by Iran) controlling the north; the IRG (supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE) nominally controlling the south; the STC, a UAE-backed separatist group seeking independence for southern Yemen; and militant groups like the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula ('AQAP') exploiting the chaotic state of Yemen to establish footholds in central and eastern Yemen.<sup>7</sup>

The war has been marked by shifting alliances and betrayals. In 2017, the Houthis killed their ally President Saleh after he attempted to switch sides.<sup>8</sup> The Saudi-led coalition itself has faced internal divisions, with the UAE-backed STC occasionally fighting against Saudi-backed government forces. Meanwhile, regional dynamics have heavily influenced the conflict: Saudi Arabia and Iran have used Yemen as a proxy battleground, while the US has supported the Saudi coalition with arms sales and intelligence sharing, though this support has varied under different administrations.<sup>9</sup>

By 2024, despite various UN-brokered peace initiatives and a general reduction in fighting since a 2022 truce, Yemen remains effectively split between these various factions, with the Houthis also engaging in attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza.<sup>10</sup>

### 2. The Houthis

The Houthi movement, formally known as *'Anṣāru-llāh* (Partisans of God), emerged as a significant force in Yemen's complex political landscape during the 1990s under the leadership of Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi.<sup>11</sup> Rooted in *Zaydi Shi'ah* Islam, a minority sect within Yemen and the broader Islamic world, the movement initially began as a religious revival but quickly evolved into a formidable political-military organization. During the 2000s, the group directly challenged then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government, and survived multiple military campaigns aimed at their suppression between 2004 and 2010. During this time, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi was killed, but the movement persisted under new leadership.<sup>12</sup> The Houthis' role in Yemen's conflict began to crystallize in 2014 when they captured Yemen's capital Sanaa,

Strikes as Alliance Builds Against Houthi Rebels", *The Guardian*, 26 March 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Kali Robinson, "Yemen's Tragedy: War, Stalemate, and Suffering", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 23 May 2023.

<sup>8</sup> "Yemen's Houthi: Ali Abdullah Saleh Killed for 'Treason'", *Al Jazeera*, 4 December 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch, "US Assistance to Saudi-Led Coalition Risks Complicity in War Crimes", 7 April 2022.

<sup>10</sup> "Who Are the Houthis and Why Is the US Targeting Them?", *BBC News*, 25 March 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Nawal al-Maghafi, "From Protester to Politician: The Rise of a Houthi Revolutionary", *Middle East Eye*, 15 September 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 75–97.

<sup>1</sup> See, generally, Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, Cambridge University Press, 2000. Also, see John Peterson, *Yemen: The Search for a Modern State*, Johns Hopkins University Press, London, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Whitaker, "Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh Resigns – But It Changes Little", *The Guardian*, 24 November 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Jeb Boone, "Array of Security Challenges Face Yemen's New Leader – Abd Rabbu Mansour al-Hadi", *The Jamestown Foundation*, 8 March 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Nawal al-Maghafi, "From Protester to Politician: The Rise of a Houthi Revolutionary", *Middle East Eye*, 15 September 2015.

<sup>5</sup> The Gulf states involved in the operation were Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Roberts and Kareem Shaheen, "Saudi Arabia Launches Yemen Air

forcing President Abd-Rabbuh Mansour Hadi to flee the country.<sup>13</sup> This territorial expansion prompted Saudi Arabia to form a military coalition in March 2015,<sup>14</sup> launching a campaign of airstrikes against Houthi positions with support from several Arab states and logistical backing from Western powers, particularly the US.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the conflict, the Houthis have maintained control over Yemen's north-west regions, including the capital and densely populated areas where approximately two-thirds of Yemen's population resides.<sup>16</sup> Their governance in these territories has been characterized by authoritarian practices, including suppression of opposition and strict social controls. Despite international pressure and economic sanctions, they have established parallel state institutions in areas under their control.

The Houthis' military capabilities have evolved substantially during the conflict. Initially relying on guerrilla tactics and light weapons, the Houthis later developed or acquired sophisticated weaponry, including ballistic missiles, armed drones and anti-ship missiles.<sup>17</sup> This military evolution enabled them to launch attacks against Saudi Arabian territory and maritime targets in the Red Sea, significantly expanding the conflict's regional dimensions. Iran's support has been crucial to the Houthis' sustainability in the Yemen conflict, though Iranian actors contest the prevailing perceptions of Iranian influence. Domestically, the Houthis face a complex web of opposition. Their primary adversaries include the STC<sup>18</sup> which seeks southern independence (see Section 3. below), the AQAP<sup>19</sup> which is a persistent terrorist threat, and the Islamist party Islah which maintains significant influence in several regions (the last two are discussed in Section 4).

In February 2021, the Houthis launched an attack to seize Marib,<sup>20</sup> representing their most ambitious military campaign.<sup>21</sup> The city of Marib is the IRG's last northern stronghold in Yemen and a major energy hub. Though the Houthis failed to fully capture Marib, they made substantial territorial gains in the surrounding province, demonstrating their continued military capabilities despite years of coalition airstrikes. During this period, the Houthis also rebuffed multiple diplomatic initiatives, including efforts by UN Special Envoys Martin Griffiths and Hans Grundberg, often demanding the complete lifting of the Saudi-led blockade as a precondition for ceasefire talks.<sup>22</sup> In April 2022, a UN-brokered truce temporarily halted cross-border attacks, though the Houthis never fully adhered to all its provisions, and the formal agreement expired in October 2022 without renewal.<sup>23</sup>

By late 2022 and throughout 2023, the Houthis benefited from a *de facto* ceasefire with Saudi Arabia as Riyadh sought an exit from the costly intervention.<sup>24</sup> This relative calm allowed them to strengthen

<sup>13</sup> "How Yemen's Capital Sanaa was Seized by Houthi Rebels", *BBC News*, 27 September 2014.

<sup>14</sup> "Saudi and Arab Allies Bomb Houthi Positions in Yemen", *Al Jazeera*, 26 March 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Roberts and Shaheen, 2015, see *supra* note 6. Also see, Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "Obama's Gotten the U.S. Stuck in Yemen. Is He Looking for a Way Out?", *The HuffPost*, 26 October 2015, and Kathleen Hennessey, "In Devising a Plan in Iraq, U.S. Looks to its Yemen Model", *Los Angeles Times*, 22 June 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Riede "Who Are the Houthis, and Why Are We at War with Them?", *Brookings*, 18 December 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Yemen Data Project, "Saudi Coalition Airwar 2015-2022" (available on its web site).

<sup>18</sup> Sana Uqba, "Yemen's 'Third Government' Emerges in Southern Yemen", *The New Arab*, 11 May 2017.

<sup>19</sup> International Crisis Group, "Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base", 2 February 2017.

<sup>20</sup> "Houthi Offensive on Yemen's Marib Threatens Mass Displacement, U.N. Warns", *Reuters*, 17 February 2021.

<sup>21</sup> "Fighting Intensifies Between Houthis, Yemen Gov't Forces in Marib", *Al Jazeera*, 28 February 2021.

<sup>22</sup> "Yemen: Lull in Major Fighting Provides Space for Dialogue", *UN News*, 16 January 2023.

<sup>23</sup> "Yemen: 'Light at the End of the Tunnel' as First Nationwide Truce in Six Years Continues", *UN News*, 14 April 2022.

<sup>24</sup> "Saudi Arabia Seeks Exit from Costly Yemen War to Focus on Projects at Home Despite Doubts about Peace", *The Arab Weekly*, 27 March 2023.

their governance structures in controlled territories while continuing to develop their military arsenal. The period saw increased evidence of sophisticated weapons systems being deployed, including long-range drones and missiles capable of reaching targets in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel. The most dramatic shift in Houthi strategy came in late 2023 following the outbreak of the Israel–Hamas war. Declaring solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, the Houthis launched a campaign targeting international shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden,<sup>25</sup> attacking vessels they claimed had connections to Israel, the US or the UK.<sup>26</sup> These maritime operations represented a significant escalation of the Houthis' conflict beyond Yemen's borders, directly challenging international maritime security and global commerce.<sup>27</sup> By January 2024, their attacks had forced major shipping companies to re-route vessels,<sup>28</sup> disrupting supply chains and increasing shipping costs worldwide. The maritime campaign provoked direct military confrontation with the US and the UK, which launched Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect commercial shipping and subsequently conducted strikes against Houthi military facilities in Yemen.<sup>29</sup> Despite these counter-strikes, the Houthis maintained their campaign against shipping and expanded their target list to include US and UK naval vessels. This confrontation with Western powers bolstered the Houthis' image among their supporters as a resistance force against Western 'imperialism' and increased their political standing within certain sectors of Yemeni society.

By early 2025, the Houthis had cemented themselves as not merely a local rebel group but a regional actor with the capacity to disrupt international security and economic systems. Their persistent attacks in the Red Sea corridor, combined with advanced weaponry and ideological discipline, have forced regional and global powers to acknowledge them as a significant player whose influence extends far beyond Yemen's borders. Despite renewed diplomatic efforts to end the Yemen conflict, the Houthis' entrenched position and their ongoing maritime campaign have complicated prospects for a comprehensive peace settlement, making them an inescapable factor in both regional security calculations and any future political arrangement for Yemen.

### 3. Yemen's Internationally Recognized Government

The IRG has played a central role in the Yemen conflict as the entity formally recognized by the international community as Yemen's legitimate government. Originally led by President Abd-Rabbuh Mansour Hadi after he fled from Sanaa to Aden in 2015 when Houthi-Saleh forces took control of the capital, the IRG has since evolved into a coalition of diverse anti-Houthi factions under the Presidential Leadership Council ('PLC').<sup>30</sup> This eight-member council, established in 2022 and chaired by Rashad al-Alimi, represents various political and military forces, including southern separatists, tribal leaders and political party representatives. Despite international recognition and support from the Saudi-led military coalition, the IRG has struggled with internal divisions, particularly between pro-unity factions and southern secessionists represented by the STC. These tensions have periodically erupted into armed confrontations, as seen in 2019 when the STC took control of Aden and in 2022 when STC-affiliated forces seized the Shabwa governorate. The IRG's effectiveness has been further hampered by its financial dependence on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, limited territorial control, and governance challenges in areas it nominally controls.<sup>31</sup> By late 2023, the IRG had committed to UN-brokered measures to imple-

<sup>25</sup> Marc Martorell Junyent, "Why Are the Houthis Getting Involved in a War Between Israel and Hamas?", *Stimson Center*, 4 December 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Joshua Keating, "Hamas, Hezbollah and the Other Iran-Backed Groups Taking Aim at Israel – and US Targets", *The Messenger*, 31 October 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Faozi Al-Goidi and Oumeyma Chelbi, "Conflict in the Red Sea Makes Economic Waves", *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, 22 February 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Simon Speakman Cordall and Justin Salhani, "Houthi Drone Strikes Tel Aviv: How Significant is the Attack?", *Al Jazeera*, 19 July 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Dan Sabbagh and Julian Borger, "US and UK Prepare to Launch Strikes Against Houthis in Yemen", *The Guardian*, 11 January 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Shuaib Almosawa and Rod Nordland, "Yemen's Former Leader, Held by Rebels, Leaves Capital", *The New York Times*, 21 February 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Mohamed Ghobari and Ahmed Tolba, "Yemen President Cedes Powers to Council as Saudi Arabia Pushes to End War", *Reuters*, 8 April 2022.

ment a nationwide ceasefire, signaling a potential path toward resolving the conflict.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. The Southern Transitional Council

The STC, established in May 2017 under the leadership of former Aden Governor Aidarous al-Zubaidi, has emerged as a powerful separatist force advocating for the independence of southern Yemen.<sup>33</sup> Heavily backed by the UAE with financial support, military training and equipment, the STC has built a significant armed presence through its control of security forces in Aden and several southern governorates. STC repeatedly challenged the IRG's authority, most notably in August 2019 when it seized control of Aden and other southern territories, effectively creating a 'state within a state' in areas under its control.<sup>34</sup> As both facilitator and beneficiary in the war economy, the STC controls critical infrastructure, including Aden's port, airport and government institutions, generating revenue through taxation, customs fees, and control of fuel imports. This economic power has allowed the STC to maintain parallel governance structures and security forces largely independent from the central government. Though the November 2019 Riyadh Agreement attempted to integrate the STC into the Hadi government,<sup>35</sup> implementation faltered, and the Council continues to operate with significant autonomy while periodically clashing with government forces, adding another complex dimension to Yemen's multilayered conflict.

The STC dramatically declared self-rule in April 2020 across territories under its control, effectively challenging the IRG's authority.<sup>36</sup> Though this declaration was rescinded in July 2020 following Saudi pressure and negotiations toward implementing the Riyadh Agreement, the STC maintained its *de facto* control over Aden and other southern governorates. The Council's influence was further institutionalized when its leader, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, became a member of the Presidential Leadership Council formed in April 2022.<sup>37</sup> In 2023–2024, the STC took significant steps towards building state-like structures by establishing a supreme executive leadership, announcing a National Charter, forming a House of Commons, and even directly requesting US military support against the Houthis in January 2024 – all actions that demonstrate its continued pursuit of southern autonomy while strategically participating in Yemen's recognized governance structures.<sup>38</sup>

#### 5. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Other Actors

Al-Qaeda's presence in Yemen has deep historical roots dating back to the early 1990s when 'Afghan Arabs' (veterans of the anti-Soviet jihād) returned to Yemen just as the north and south unified. These jihādists initially found political accommodation within Yemen's system, with some joining the Islah party (a Sunni Islāmist party including the Muslim Brotherhood) while more militant veterans formed the Islamic Jihad Movement. During this period, jihādists and President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime were aligned against the Yemeni Socialist Party, with Afghan Arabs reportedly helping northern forces during the 1994 civil war.<sup>39</sup> Through the 1990s and early 2000s, Yemen's jihādist landscape evolved through several waves. The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army emerged with a transnational agenda, followed by the 2000 USS Cole bombing that brought Yemen into the spotlight of US counter-terrorism

<sup>32</sup> "Yemen Warring Parties Commit to Ceasefire, UN-led Peace Process, says Envoy", *Al Jazeera*, 23 December 2023.

<sup>33</sup> "Yemen: What is the Southern Transitional Council?", *Al Jazeera*, 26 April 2020.

<sup>34</sup> "Separatists Seize Aden Presidential Palace, Gov't Military Camps", *Al Jazeera*, 19 August 2019. See also, "Southern Yemeni Separatists tell Saudi Arabia: Evict Islah or Lose the War", *Middle East Monitor*, 14 August 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "The Riyadh Agreement on Yemen: Arrangements and Chances of Success", 19 November 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "The Declaration of Self-Rule in South Yemen: Background and Implications", 30 April 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Casey Coombs, "Presidential Council Replaces Hadi", *Sanaa Center*, 3 May 2022.

<sup>38</sup> "Yemen Houthis say STC National Charter a 'Complete Coup' Against Yemen", *Middle East Monitor*, 10 May 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew W. Terrill, *The Struggle for Yemen and the Challenge of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2013, p. 23.

efforts.<sup>40</sup> After 9/11, Saleh moved against al-Qaeda, largely defeating it by 2003. However, a 2006 prison break involving future AQAP founders Nassar al-Wuhayshi and Qasim al-Raymi and their death in the US strike revitalized the movement.<sup>41</sup> By January 2009, they had formally established AQAP through the merger of al-Qaeda's Yemeni and Saudi branches. The 2011 Arab Spring uprising created perfect conditions for AQAP's expansion. The group established Ansar al-Sharia as its local insurgent brand to appeal to Yemenis while maintaining AQAP for international operations. This strategic shift enabled them to capture and govern territory for the first time, establishing control in the Abyan province.<sup>42</sup> Though temporarily pushed back by President Hadi's forces and local militias in 2012, AQAP continued evolving its strategy. The failed political transition of 2014, the Houthi takeover of Sanaa, and the subsequent Saudi-led intervention in 2015 created unprecedented opportunities for AQAP.<sup>43</sup>

When Yemen's political transition failed in 2014, AQAP declared war against the Houthis and dramatically increased their attacks, claiming responsibility for 149 operations in less than 90 days across 14 governorates.<sup>44</sup> As the conflict intensified with Saudi Arabia's 2015 intervention, AQAP exploited the security vacuum to seize territory, most notably capturing Mukalla, the capital of Hadramout province.<sup>45</sup> By 2015, their estimated strength had grown to approximately 4,000 fighters, supported by substantial financial resources and an arsenal of heavy weapons acquired from abandoned military camps or indirectly from the Saudi-led coalition. AQAP benefited strategically from Yemen's increasing sectarianism and the Houthis' military expansion, which created opportunities for tactical alliances with various anti-Houthi forces. Though these 'resistance fighters' generally did not share AQAP's ideology, their common opposition to Houthi-Saleh forces temporarily aligned their interests on multiple fronts, including al-Bayda, Shebwa, Marib, Jawf and Taiz.<sup>46</sup> While UAE-led forces eventually pushed AQAP from Mukalla in April 2016, the group simply relocated to adjoining areas or blended into local populations, maintaining intermittent control of territories in Abyan and Shebwa, and remaining deeply embedded in Yemen's complex conflict landscape.<sup>47</sup>

#### 6. Iran

Iran's involvement in the Yemen conflict has evolved from limited early support to a more substantial relationship with the Houthi movement.<sup>48</sup> In the conflict's initial stages around 2014–2015, Iran's support for the Houthis was relatively modest, consisting primarily of political backing and limited material assistance.<sup>49</sup> While Saudi Arabia and its allies characterized the conflict as Iranian proxy warfare, available evidence from this period suggests Iran was opportunistically exploiting the situation rather than directing Houthi actions or providing game-changing

<sup>40</sup> Gregory Johnsen, "The Resiliency of Yemen's Aden-Abyan Islamic Army", *The Jamestown Foundation*, 13 July 2006.

<sup>41</sup> "Yemen al-Qaeda Chief al-Wuhayshi Killed in US Strike", *BBC News*, 16 June 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Terrill, 2013, p. 4, see *supra* note 39.

<sup>43</sup> Saeed Al Batati, "Yemen: The Truth Behind al-Qaeda's Takeover of Mukalla", *Al Jazeera*, 16 September 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Oren Adaki, "AQAP Claims 149 Attacks in Yemen Since Late September", *The Long War Journal*, 19 December 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Saeed Al Batati, 2015, see *supra* note 43.

<sup>46</sup> International Crisis Group, 2017, see *supra* note 19.

<sup>47</sup> "Yemen Conflict: Troops retake Mukalla from al-Qaeda", *BBC News*, 25 April 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Mona Saif, "Shades of Grey: The Evolving Links Between the Houthi and Iran", CRU Policy Brief, Clingendael, 11 January 2023.

<sup>49</sup> The foundation of Iran's Yemen strategy rested on three key pillars of its foreign policy: maintaining an active regional role, opposing Western and Israeli influence, and pursuing an alternative regional order through its 'Axis of Resistance'. Yemen's strategic location along the *Bab al-Manddab* Strait, through which significant global oil shipments pass, makes it an invaluable piece in Iran's regional chess game. See Katherine Zimmerman, "Yemen's Houthis and the Expansion of Iran's Axis of Resistance", American Enterprise Institute, 14 March 2022, pp. 7 ff.

support.<sup>50</sup> It has been suggested that the relationship between Iran and the Houthis is more nuanced than a simple proxy arrangement.<sup>51</sup> While the Houthis have adopted elements of Iranian revolutionary ideology and rhetoric, they maintain their distinct *Zaydi* identity and local objectives. The movement emerged independently from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (‘IRGC’),<sup>52</sup> unlike other regional groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>53</sup> Iran’s military support to the Houthis has also grown significantly since 2009. This support includes sophisticated weapons systems, technical expertise and military training. The weapons connection between Iran and the Houthis has been documented by multiple UN panels of experts and independent researchers, though the exact mechanisms of transfer remain unclear in public sources.<sup>54</sup> The technological evolution of Houthi military capabilities – from modified Soviet-era missiles to more advanced drones and anti-ship missiles – reflects a transfer of know-how that has transformed a once-limited insurgent force into what seems to be a significant regional military actor.

Iran’s strategic objectives in Yemen appear multifaceted, but they may be opportunistic rather than central to its regional priorities. By maintaining ties with the Houthis, Iran gains a relatively low-cost means to pressure Saudi Arabia, complicating its rival’s security environment and imposing significant financial and reputational costs on Riyadh. The Yemen conflict diverts Saudi resources and attention from other regional theaters where Iran has had more direct interests, such as Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.<sup>55</sup> Yemen has never achieved the same priority status in Iranian strategic thinking as these other arenas, reflecting more limited historical, religious and economic ties between Iran and Yemen.

Iranian actors sometimes argue that the religious dimension of Iran’s relationship with the Houthis is overstated in international discourses. While both are *Shi’ah*, the Houthis follow the *Zaydi Madhhab*, which has conceptions of the imamat that vary from Iranian Twelver *Madhhab*.<sup>56</sup> The Houthi movement has increasingly adopted revolutionary rhetoric and symbols associated with the Iranian Islamic Revolution, but it is not clear how deeply this is ideologically integrated. Iranian officials consistently maintain that the Houthis maintain significant autonomy in their decision-making and are primarily driven by local Yemeni politics and interests rather than functioning as Iran’s proxy.<sup>57</sup>

Since 2019, Iran’s role has evolved as the Houthis consolidated control over northern Yemen and developed greater self-sufficiency. The relationship appears to have become more institutionalized, with reports of Houthi representatives stationed in Tehran and increased

<sup>50</sup> Michael Knights, “An Heir and a Spare? How Yemen’s ‘Southern Hezbollah’ Could Change Iran’s Deterrent Calculus”, Policy Notes No. 142, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Allison Minor, “The Danger of Calling the Houthis an Iranian Proxy”, *Brookings*, 3 September 2024.

<sup>52</sup> Council for Foreign Relations, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards”, 12 November 2024.

<sup>53</sup> Council for Foreign Relations, “Kali Robinson and Will Mellow, Iran’s Regional Armed Network”, 15 April 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Farzin Nadimi, “The UN Exposes Houthi Reliance on Iranian Weapons”, Policy Watch No. 3261, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 13 February 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Drika Weddington, “Rivalry in the Middle East: The History of Saudi-Iranian Relations and its Implications on American Foreign Policy”, Master’s thesis, Missouri State University, 2017, p. 104.

<sup>56</sup> Saif, 2023, see *supra* note 48.

<sup>57</sup> Minor, 2024, see *supra* note 51.

co-ordination between the groups. The Houthis’ attacks on maritime shipping in the Red Sea beginning in November 2023, ostensibly in support of Palestinians during the Israel-Gaza conflict, demonstrated their capacity to influence regional security dynamics in ways aligned with Iran’s regional position.<sup>58</sup> The maritime dimension represents the most significant recent evolution in Iran’s Yemen strategy.<sup>59</sup> Iranian technical assistance has been crucial in developing the Houthis’ anti-ship missile capabilities and maritime drone operations that have disrupted international shipping.<sup>60</sup> These developments have elevated Yemen’s strategic significance in Iran’s regional calculations, potentially providing Tehran with indirect influence over a critical global maritime chokepoint at the *Bab al-Mandab* Strait.

Despite their intimate relationship, the Houthis and Iran naturally maintain different priorities and interests that sometimes diverge. The Houthis have occasionally demonstrated an appearance of independence from Iranian preferences in peace negotiations and regional diplomacy.<sup>61</sup> Their fundamental focus remains securing dominance within Yemen and achieving international recognition, while Iran’s regional strategy encompasses a much broader set of objectives across the Middle East. This reality underscores that while Iran has become a vital supporter of the Houthis, the nuanced regional dynamic should be taken into account.<sup>62</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

The Yemen conflict illustrates the multidimensional nature of modern warfare, where overt state-sponsored military support operates alongside shadowy smuggling networks, sophisticated financial operations and grassroots facilitation. The layered ecosystem of facilitators and funders – from regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran to local power brokers and international actors – has transformed Yemen into one of the world’s most intractable humanitarian disasters. As the conflict enters its second decade, the web of competing interests, shifting alliances and external interventions continues to fragment Yemen’s political landscape, complicating efforts toward a comprehensive peace settlement while ordinary Yemenis bear the devastating consequences of this proxy war that has effectively divided their country among various competing factions with divergent visions for Yemen’s future.

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<sup>58</sup> Wolf-Christian Paes, Edward Beales, Fabian Hinz and Albert Vidal, “Navigating Troubled Waters: The Houthis’ Campaign in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden”, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 3 December 2024.

<sup>59</sup> Julian Barnes, “U.S. Says It Struck 5 Houthi Targets in Yemen, Including an Underwater Drone”, *The New York Times*, 18 February 2024.

<sup>60</sup> Paes, Beales, Hinz and Vidal, 2024, see *supra* note 58.

<sup>61</sup> Maziar Motamedi, “‘Every Shot Fired’: Are Yemen’s Houthis a Proxy Force for Iran?”, *Al Jazeera*, 22 March 2025.

<sup>62</sup> Minor, 2024, see *supra* note 51.



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