



The Houthi Movement and the War in Yemen: Development and Significance

Overview

- ▶ The Houthi movement was established in Yemen in the early 1990s, based on Shiite Zaydi Muslim residents, who make up about 30% of the country's population. In 2004, the movement mounted a rebellion against the central government in Yemen because it had become too closely affiliated with the US and Israel. Until 2009, six rounds of fighting between the parties took place, at the end of which the Houthis established autonomy in northern Yemen. Over time, the Houthis managed to increase their power and areas of control, and in 2015, they deposed the incumbent president. This move has led, among other things, to the establishment of a coalition of Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which set itself the goal of defeating the Houthis and restoring the previous regime. In response, the Houthis also began to carry out attacks on the territory of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, using advanced weapons provided by Iran.
- ▶ Iran supported the Houthis all along, provided them with military, economic, and political support, and included them in the Axis of Resistance¹ [note 1] under its leadership. In supporting the Houthis, Iran sees an opportunity to gain a foothold in Yemen and respond to the threat from the south by Saudi Arabia.
- ▶ The advanced weapons provided by Iran to the Houthis included, inter alia, ballistic missiles and UAVs, which they also used to carry out attacks against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.
- ▶ Due to the geo-strategic importance of Yemen, the destabilization of the country triggered a regional struggle involving external entities that include on one hand Iran and its affiliates, who consider the Houthis allies, and on the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, which take an active part in the civil war and support the anti-Houthi bloc in Yemen. On the

¹ The Axis of Resistance is the name given to an anti-American and anti-Israeli political-military alliance among Iran, the Assad regime in Syria, Iran's affiliates (Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi movement in Yemen, and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria), Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC). The alliance advocates, inter alia, a violent struggle against Israel.

side that opposes the Houthis are also the USA and other Western countries which are not (declaredly) involved in the fighting but are taking significant steps such as imposing a naval blockade and sanctions on the Houthis, while at the same time providing operational, logistical and state aid to the anti-Houthi bloc.

► In April 2022, a ceasefire was announced between the parties, but it is fragile, frequently violated, and could collapse at any moment. However, there is an apparent desire by the different parties to calm the situation at least in the near future. The Houthis have their own local and regional strategic goals and it seems that their main attention is focused on trying to become a central player in the new government that will be established in Yemen if they reach an agreement to end the war. Such an agreement must also include the regulation of their relations with their historical enemy Saudi Arabia.

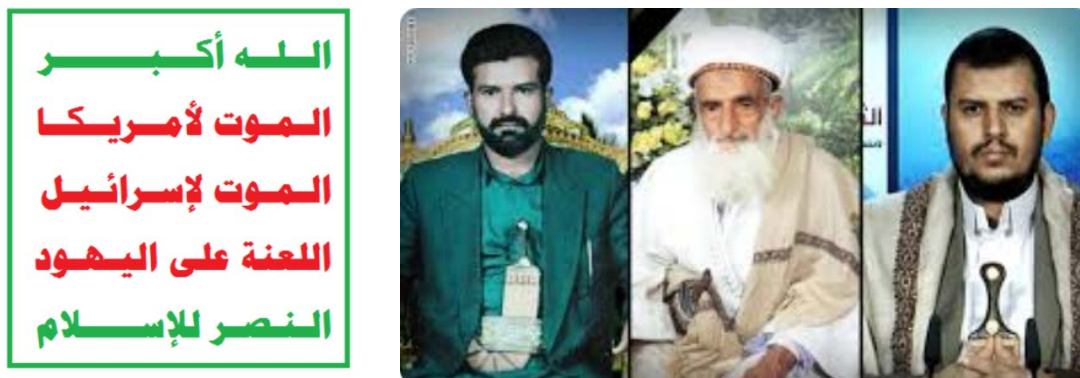
► The recent period was used by the parties to reorganize and arm themselves, and in the event that the ceasefire collapses, the fighting may resume with even greater intensity. If the parties reach an agreement, the terms of the end of the conflict may affect the balance of power in the Middle East and the strategic position of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the USA, and possibly even Israel.

► In the ITIC's assessment, the Houthis have weapons that can harm Israel, and in the past, senior Houthi officials even made statements about a willingness to do so if Israel posed an immediate threat. The potential threat to Israel from the Houthis exists, but for now, in the Israeli context, the Houthis are mainly engaged in statements of support for Hezbollah and the Palestinian terrorist organizations and providing financial aid to these organizations for the fight against Israel.

Background and development of the Houthi movement

► The Houthi movement was established in Yemen. The country lies at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, opposite the coast of East Africa, dominating the Bab el-Mandeb Strait that connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, being a central international shipping route for cargo ships and oil tankers. Yemen's geo-strategic location led to its becoming a central arena in the multi-player regional struggle in the Middle East,

which includes, among others, Iran and its affiliates, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, the USA, and Israel.²



Right: The Al-Houthi family. Left: Hussein al-Houthi, the founder of the movement; right: Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, the current leader; center: their father, Badr al-Din al-Houthi (EbnHusseini1424 Twitter account, May 30, 2019). Left: The Houthi movement's flag, with the slogan: Allah Akbar, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory for Islam" (UANI Twitter account, March 6, 2021)

► The Shiite Zaydi residents of Yemen make up about 30% of the total population in the country and are the basis on which the Houthi movement was founded in the early 1990s. The main reason for the establishment of the movement was the need to respond to the strengthening of Sunni-Salafi movements in the Saada province in northern Yemen, in the period after the unification of Yemen in 1994.³ Beginning in the early 2000s, the movement started to radicalize its positions towards the Yemeni government, until it launched an open rebellion against it in 2004, which included six rounds of fighting until 2009. At the end of this period, the Houthis established autonomy in northern Yemen after the government and the Yemeni army withdrew from the region and a Houthi government system separate from the central government was established in their place.⁴

► In 2011, after mass demonstrations and protests, the long-standing regime of **Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh** fell and **Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi** was sworn in as his

² On the importance of Yemen and the characteristics of the country, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from September 23, 2009, "Geopolitically strategic Yemen has become a focus of local Iranian-Saudi Arabian strife."

³ It should be noted that the relations between Shiites and Sunnis in Yemen did not ignite a significant conflict before the rise of the Houthis. In fact, religious affiliation was not a significant element in the identity of most Yemeni citizens before the current civil war. Conversely, the Houthis emphasized their difference from the Sunni citizens of Yemen and worked to portray them as the enemy. The civil war encouraged the separation between the Shiites and the Sunnis, with the former being identified today with the area where the Houthis rule in northern Yemen, while the latter are identified with the rest of the country's territory, especially in the south and east. For further information, see Farea al-Muslimi, "How Sunni-Shia Sectarianism is Poisoning Yemen," Carnegie Middle East Center, December 2015.

⁴ For further information on the background to the rise of the Houthis, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from December 11, 2016, "The ISIS Branch in Yemen and Its Role in the Power Struggles"

successor. Hadi tried unsuccessfully to preserve the central government and some cohesion among the Yemeni people. The governmental and security vacuum was exploited by the Houthis to significantly increase their power and area of activity until they managed to capture the capital Sana'a in 2015, deposed President Hadi, and established a new transitional government. One of the reasons for the extraordinary speed of the Houthis' campaign of conquest was the alliance they made with the deposed President Saleh and especially with the tribes and military forces loyal to him. This alliance ended in 2017 when Saleh was eliminated by the Houthis after apparently negotiating with their enemies in an attempt to reach an agreement that would return him to power (Al-Masdar Online, January 3, 2021).



Right: Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, Yemen's president until the ceasefire in April 2022 (teleSUR English Twitter account, April 8, 2022). Left: A Houthi parade marking the anniversary of the occupation of Sana'a (Telegram channel of Al-Masirah, the Houthi media arm, September 9, 2022)

- ▶ With the occupation of the capital Sana'a in 2015, Hadi fled, with Saudi assistance, to the city of Aden in southern Yemen and declared that he was still the president. In order to help the forces loyal to Hadi, an Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates was established with the goal of defeating the Houthis and returning Yemen to the control of the Hadi government. The conflict between the forces of Hadi and the coalition versus the Houthis has since known periods of bloodshed as well as ceasefires while expanding into the territory of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.
- ▶ The stated goal of the Houthi movement in the first years of its existence was to increase its influence in the management of daily affairs in Yemen, to end discrimination of the Shiite population in the Zaydi regions, and cut off Saudi influence in the country. In recent years, and especially in light of the significant strengthening of the movement, its goals have apparently been extended to the liberation of certain Zaydi areas in Saudi Arabia (a goal that became more important since Saudi Arabia joined the campaign in Yemen) and to the

recognition of the movement as representing Yemen in the ceasefire agreements that will end the war. Assuming the war ends on their terms, the Houthis apparently aim to suppress any opposition within Yemen and take control of the entire country (International Crisis Group, 2022).



Right: Houthi movement leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi (Telegram channel of Al-Masirah, the Houthi media arm, January 30, 2023). Left: Former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh (Al-Jazeera, December 5, 2017)

Organizational structure

- At the center of the leadership of the Houthi movement (whose official name is Ansar Allah) is the Al-Houthi family. The family, which originates from the Houthi tribal group in the Saada province in northern Yemen, has positioned itself as the leader of the Zaydi movement in Yemen and controls most of the top positions in the current Houthi government. The figure that is considered as the founder of the Houthi movement is **Hussein al-Houthi**, who led the movement until he died in 2004. His half-brother **Abd al-Malik al-Houthi** replaced him as the leader of the movement, a position he still holds today.
- Besides the Al-Houthi family, the Houthi movement is based on a wide network of alliances and collaborations with families and tribal groups that originate mainly in northern Yemen. The heterogeneous population controlled by the Houthi movement represents a considerable challenge for the Houthi government, which does not always constitute adequate representation for all its parts. In addition, given the multitude of groups controlled by the Houthi government, relative autonomy is granted to local commanders in matters such as tax collection and the recruitment of fighters. In this context, there are reports that from time to time clashes break out within the territories of the Houthi government between different groups, which increased especially after the collapse of the alliance between the Houthis and the loyalists of Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the death of the latter. In such cases, the Houthi government is forced to act to maintain these fragile alliances through political and

economic gestures, and sometimes even using forceful repressive measures (ACLED, February 9, 2021).

► The highest authority that manages the Houthi government is the **Jihadist Council** (Al-Majles al-Jihadi), which is subordinate to the leader of the movement. The Jihadist Council is entrusted with outlining the strategic policy of the Houthi government, the military conduct, and the cooperation with the allies of the Houthi government. The activity and composition of the Jihadist Council are not widely publicized, but as far as is known, it includes nine members of the senior Houthi government. It is influenced by Iran and its affiliates, and apparently also consists of representatives of the Iranian Quds Force and the Lebanese Hezbollah (Al-Masdar Online, March 14, 2022).

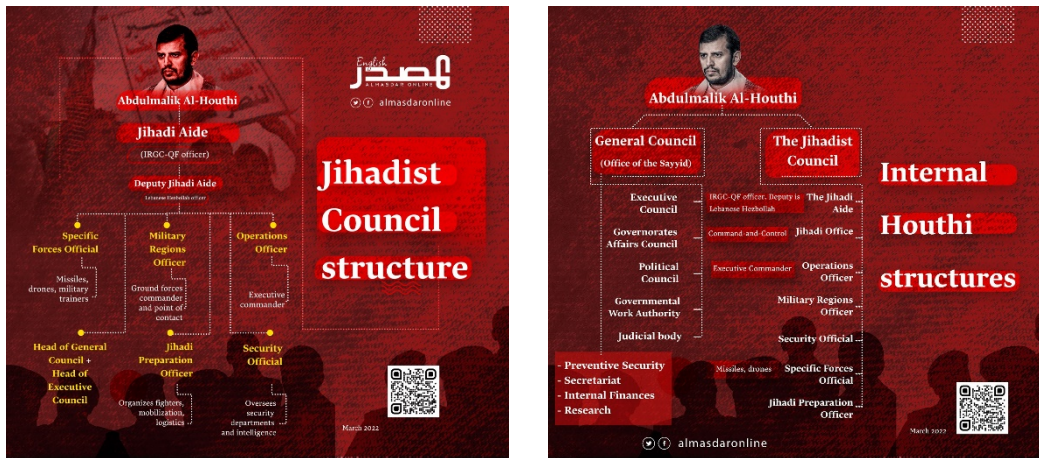
► The Houthi security forces are divided into several branches or offices under the command of members of the Jihadist Council:

- ◆ The Supreme Command;
- ◆ Army Command;
- ◆ The Land Forces Command, which is also divided into several commands according to combat zones;
- ◆ The Internal Security branch;
- ◆ The Special Forces branch, which includes ballistic missile and UAV units;
- ◆ The branch responsible for Manpower.

► Although the capacity of the fighting force available to the Houthis is not known with certainty, there are estimates that the total security forces of the Houthis number over 100,000 fighters (Yemen Post, April 10, 2010). According to other estimates, the forces number about 200,000 fighters (Al-Masdar Online, January 3, 2021). The number of fighters has increased significantly due to the successes of the Houthis on the battlefield in recent years, especially after they proved that they are an equal opponent to the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

► The management of the areas of activity that are not primarily military is under the responsibility of the General Council (Al-Majles al-Aam), headed by one of the senior figures loyal to the movement's leader. The General Council consists of several departments, or administrative councils, which are entrusted with the day-to-day management of the Houthi government. These departments are responsible for issues such as the social and educational

system, the administrative management, the political cooperation system within the Houthi-controlled areas, and the judicial system.



Right: The government structure of the Houthi movement. Left: The internal structure of the Houthi Jihadist Council (Al-Masdar Online, March 14, 2022)

Military capabilities and weapons

► Besides standard weapons such as small arms, anti-tank missiles, and roadside charges, the Houthi army has also advanced weapons such as ballistic missiles, UAVs, anti-aircraft missiles, and self-produced and foreign-made anti-ship missiles. These advanced weapons constitute a significant operational and technological challenge to their opponents, especially to the Hadi administration, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Rockets and ballistic missiles⁵

► With the occupation of Sana'a and the overthrow of Hadi's regime, the Houthis took control of the Yemeni army's weapons stockpiles and an arsenal that included, among other things, rockets and missiles, mostly of Soviet manufacture. These were adapted by the Houthis for their needs, such as Qaher-1 and Qaher-2M missiles for ranges of 250-400 km, Tochka missiles for ranges of 70-120 km, and Scud-C to a range of 550 km. In addition, as the Houthi army grew stronger, it received from Iran a supply of Iranian and Syrian-made weapons, and even developed self-production capabilities with the help of Iran. Thus, additional rockets and missiles were added to its arsenal, such as Bader missiles for a range of up to 160 km, Burkan-1 for a range of up to 800 km, Burkan-2 for a range of up to 1,000 km, Burkan-3 for a range of up to 1,200 km, Quds-1 with a range of 700 km, and Quds-2 and 3 which according to some publications may even reach ranges of 1,300-2,000 km. The advanced and diverse weapons

⁵ For further details on the Houthis' rockets and missiles, see Ian Williams and Shaan Shaikh, "The Missile War in Yemen," CSIS, June 2020.

allowed the Houthis to hit quality targets deep in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and cause considerable damage.

UAVs⁶

► Starting in 2016, the Houthis began to operate on the battlefield UAVs based on Iranian-made technology which were adapted to their needs. Today, the aircraft in the hands of the Houthis include UAVs for intelligence gathering and suicide attack missions. The intelligence gathering UAVs include Rased, for a range of up to 35 km, Raqib, for a range of up to 15 km, and Hudhud-1, for a range of up to 30 km. The attack UAVs include Qasef-1, for a range of 150 km, Sammad-1, for a range of 500 km, Sammad-2, for a range of 760-900 km, and Sammad-3, for a range of 1,200-1,500 km. Similar to the ballistic missiles in the possession of the Houthis, the UAVs were used with great success to attack quality targets in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In addition, the Houthis unveiled Sammad-4, which they claim has a range of 2,000 km, and Waeid, which is claimed to have a range of 2,000-2,200 km.

Anti-aircraft missiles, anti-ship missiles, and suicide vessels⁷

► The Houthis also possess anti-aircraft missiles and anti-ship missiles mainly made by Iran, Russia, and China, which pose a significant danger to aircraft and vessels operated by coalition and US forces. These missiles were deployed successfully during the war, in instances such as the downing of three US drones by Houthi anti-aircraft missiles, while it is also claimed that several aircraft belonging to the coalition forces were also shot down (claims which were denied). In addition, as an example of the Houthis' naval attack capabilities, a Saudi Navy ship was attacked by three remote-controlled suicide vessels in January 2017.

⁶ For further details on the UAVs employed by the Houthis, see "Evolution of UAVs Employed by the Houthi Forces in Yemen," CAR, February 2020.

⁷ For further details on anti-aircraft missiles, anti-ship missiles, and suicide vessels see Ian Williams and Shaan Shaikh, "The Missile War in Yemen," CSIS, June 2020.



Right: Houthi Sammad-3 with a range of 1,200-1,500 km (Al-Masirah's Telegram channel, March 16, 2020). Left: Houthi Burkan-3 missile, with a range of 1,200 km (Al-Masirah's Telegram channel, August 2, 2019)

Iranian involvement

► Iranian aid to the Houthi movement started at the beginning of the movement's rebellion against the Yemeni government in 2004. In addition to Shiite solidarity between Iran and the Houthis,⁸ it is likely that in Iran's view, the importance of Yemen stems, first and foremost, from its geographical location at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and East Africa, as well as its vicinity to Saudi Arabia. According to Iran's perception, if it helps the Houthis take over Yemen or at least to become a leading political power in the country, a very important member will be added to the Iranian Axis of Resistance in the Middle East. Similar to other places in the Middle East such as Iraq and Syria, Iranian support for the Houthis is manifested mainly in the supply of weapons, training of military forces, transfer of funds, and political assistance.



Houthi delegation meeting with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in 2019 (Al-Masirah's Telegram channel, August 14, 2019)

⁸ The Houthis belong to the Zaydi Shia rather than the Twelver Shia (the central sect in the Shia religious branch), to which Iran belongs. As a result, the degree of loyalty and religious commitment of the Houthis to Iran is not clear-cut. This is different from the ties between Iran and its other allies such as Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq, which belong to the Twelver Shia as well.

► According to available information, large-scale Iranian arms shipments to the Houthis began as early as 2009 (Middle East Eye, May 1, 2015). Starting in 2011, when riots and mass demonstrations began to undermine Saleh's regime, Iranian support increased significantly. Iran saw this as an opportunity to strengthen the Houthis and their hold on northern Yemen and allow them to enter the governmental vacuum created in the country. The weakening of the Saleh regime and its control over the country made it easier for Iran to send arms shipments to the Houthis, and high-quality weapons such as ballistic missiles and advanced anti-tank missiles (and later also UAVs) began to flow to the Houthi army and significantly strengthened it and upgraded its capabilities. The cooperation between Iran and the Houthis grew stronger in 2014, with the occupation of Sana'a, the overthrow of the Yemeni government, and the establishment of the anti-Houthi coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (War on the Rocks, August 23, 2021).

► The entry of the coalition into the war arena in 2015 created difficulties for the Houthis, but also greatly deepened the cooperation between them and Iran. Although the coalition forces (with the help of its allies in the West) managed to maintain an air, sea, and land blockade on the territories controlled by the Houthis and make it difficult to transfer goods and weapons to them, Iran managed to transfer weapons and send advisers from among **the Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah** to train the Houthi forces in their operation. Before the coalition entered the war, the cooperation between Iran and the Houthis was of relatively low intensity, given the order of priority of Iran, which was involved in the military campaign in Syria and Iraq. However, after the entry of the coalition into the war in Yemen, Iran recognized it as an opportunity to hit Saudi Arabia in its backyard. Following this, Iran greatly upgraded its relationship with the Houthis and significantly increased their dependence on it. In accordance with this and the developments in Yemen, the Houthis expanded the campaign into the territory of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates through the use of ballistic missiles and UAVs. The strengthening of the Houthi forces also made it possible for them to attack naval targets off the coast of Yemen, and in some cases, these attacks also served Iran's strategic goals.⁹

► Both sides see their cooperation as a significant strategic advantage. For Iran, the support for the Houthis allowed the expansion of the Axis of Resistance to the southern border of

⁹ See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from August 21, 2018, "Unusual Admission by Senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Officer: Iran Was Involved in a Houthi Missile Attack on Saudi Oil Tanker"

Saudi Arabia, its great rival, and to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, without the need for large-scale military and financial investment and without direct intervention in the campaign against Saudi Arabia. For the Houthis, the Iranian support was an unprecedented leap in strengthening their position within Yemen and the Middle East after years of feeling deprived and discriminated against by the Yemeni government. However, the Houthis retain a large degree of autonomy in the management of their territory, their priorities, and their strategic objectives. Although the Iranian support¹⁰ greatly helps them operationally, financially,¹¹ and politically, the Houthis turn their attention mainly to the struggle inside Yemen. So is the campaign against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which is a consequence of the latter's intervention in the war in Yemen, and in which it is not clear how coordinated the Houthis are with Iran when it comes to their attacks in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In addition, it seems that although Iran would be interested in this, the Houthis are reluctant to expand their sphere of activity excessively while bringing new opponents into the arena until it aligns with their strategic goals.

Confrontation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE

► Beginning in March 2015, the coalition¹² led by Saudi Arabia began to carry out airstrikes against the Houthis as part of **Operation Decisive Storm** (later renamed **Operation Restoring Hope**). The goal of the coalition was to restore President Hadi to his former position and eliminate the rule of the Houthis in Yemen, which the coalition saw as expanding Iran's influence in the Arabian Peninsula. In 2015, after months of coalition airstrikes and ground moves by Hadi's forces with the support of coalition forces, Hadi's forces succeeded in stopping the Houthi advance in the campaign on the city of Aden, and a new transitional government led by Hadi was installed there. While Hadi's forces, and other coalition-backed forces, were trying to push the Houthis north, the Houthis began attacking

¹⁰ Attempts to transfer weapons to the Houthis by Iran occur frequently and it is assumed that many of them are not seized. In the years 2020-2021, a team of UN experts reviewed seizures of six arms shipments from Iran to Yemen. These shipments included large quantities of weapons such as small arms, heavy machine guns, anti-tank weapons, and advanced optical sights. See the UN document (p. 26-32)

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/415/62/PDF/N2141562.pdf?OpenElement>

¹¹ The Houthis do indeed receive significant financial aid from Iran, but at the same time they also have independent sources of funding such as property and goods taxation, and the smuggling of products such as fuel and their sale on the black market. See for example Peter Salisbury, "Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order," Middle East and North Africa Program (Chatham House), December 2017.

¹² Upon its establishment, the coalition was composed of forces from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, and Morocco.

Saudi forces across the Yemeni border and into Saudi Arabia. Attempts to find a political settlement that would end the fighting failed one after another during 2016, and the fighting in Yemen and Saudi Arabia escalated.

► In these years, additional players entered the war in Yemen:

◆ **Al-Qaeda and ISIS:** The Al-Qaeda branch currently operating in Yemen is Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). It was established in 2009 by a merger between the Saudi and Yemeni branches of Al-Qaeda. ISIS operates in Yemen through its Yemen Province (IS-YP). The organization was established in 2014 on the basis of former Al-Qaeda operatives. Both organizations began to operate more intensely in the years after the fall of the Saleh regime and managed to occupy considerable areas in southern and eastern Yemen while carrying out attacks against Hadi's forces and against the Houthis. Similar to most of the countries where these organizations operate, they do not officially maintain contacts or cooperation with other organizations or bodies. Therefore, in the civil war in Yemen, they are not identified with any one of the parties, but still, take part in it.

◆ **The Southern Transitional Council:** The severe consequences of the civil war and chaos in Yemen led to the resurgence of voices that called for years for the separation of Yemen into two different countries - North Yemen and South Yemen, as was the case before the union between them in 1990. In the absence of a strong central government and the continuation of the fighting, several leaders in the southern provinces of Yemen decided in 2017 to establish the Southern Transitional Council in order to take advantage of the situation and work for renewed independence for southern Yemen and at the same time prevent the re-establishment of a united Yemen. Initially, the Southern Transitional Council, which was supported by the United Arab Emirates, worked in cooperation with Hadi's government, but soon a conflict also developed between the parties, during which the forces of the Southern Council succeeded in capturing Aden in August 2019. In response, Saudi Arabia, which supported Hadi's government, attacked the Southern Council's forces in the city and they retreated, but later returned and took over the city once again. This division in the anti-Houthi camp hampered its capabilities and the continued fighting against the Houthis until the ceasefire in April 2022.

◆ The direct conflict between the Houthis on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, on the other hand, has been intensifying since 2016. The border between northern Yemen and Saudi Arabia has become the scene of frequent skirmishes between the parties accompanied by massive artillery fire that has claimed the lives of many soldiers and even more civilians on both sides of the border. At the same time, in another sector of the war, the United Arab Emirates mainly supported the anti-Houthi forces in southern Yemen and especially the Southern Council. With the arrival of weapons such as Iranian ballistic missiles and UAVs at the disposal of the Houthis (and later their production in Yemen itself), the campaign changed as the Houthis began to attack targets deep within the territory of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.¹³



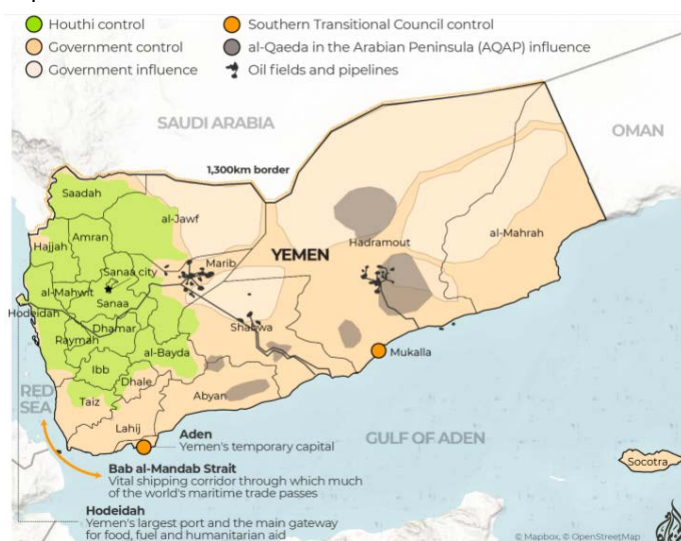
Houthi attack against Aramco oil facilities in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) on March 25, 2022 (Reuters Twitter account, March 26, 2022)

The current state of affairs

► The year 2022 heralded a significant change in the war in Yemen. At the beginning of the year, heavy fighting still continued between the Houthis and the coalition and the forces supported by it, but in April the parties reached an agreement on a ceasefire, mediated by the

¹³ From 2015 until April 2022, the Houthis carried out about 1,000 missile or rocket attacks and more than 350 UAV attacks. Over the years, the share of attacks using precision weaponry increased and in 2022 they accounted for 89% of the total airstrikes. Among the main air attacks, worth mentioning are the missile attack against the Saudi Aramco oil facilities on July 22, 2017; the missile attack on the Riyadh International Airport on November 4, 2017; the UAV attack on the Dubai International Airport on July 26, 2018; and a combined attack of missiles and UAVs on Aramco oil facilities in Jeddah on March 25, 2022. For further details on the Houthi air campaign against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, see ACLED, “Beyond Riyadh: Houthi Cross-Border Aerial Warfare 2015 -2022,” January 17, 2023.

United Nations, for two months. The ceasefire apparently had several reasons: the fact that no party has the upper hand in the war and the inability of the two parties, in the months preceding the agreement, to win significant territorial gains in Yemen; the damage to strategic targets in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as a result of the Houthi attacks; the severe humanitarian crisis in Yemen and especially in the areas controlled by the Houthis; the international criticism of the coalition's contribution to this crisis; and even the war between Ukraine and Russia and the food and goods crisis that followed, which also greatly affected the parties in Yemen.



Map of control areas in Yemen as at January 2022 (Al-Jazeera, February 9, 2022)

- ▶ As part of the ceasefire agreement, the coalition's siege on the Houthis was eased, the movement of people and goods became partially possible, and prisoner exchanges took place. An important political event that occurred immediately after the ceasefire was Hadi's resignation from his position as president, and the establishment of a **presidential council** in his place, consisting of eight members representing all the parties opposing the Houthis in Yemen. Already upon its establishment, the council received broad support from the coalition members as well as from Europe and the US (Arab News, April 8, 2022).
- ▶ Although the ceasefire was often violated, it persisted and was even extended twice until October 2022. Even after it expired, major fighting did not break out again, and negotiations between the parties, especially between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, continued. Although the fierce fighting on the fronts did not resume (despite repeated violations of the ceasefire), the Houthis, who, in view of the continuing humanitarian and economic crisis in their territory, began to lose patience with the ongoing negotiations, chose to put pressure on the other side by attacking oil facilities in the ports of southern Yemen, which severely damaged

oil exports from the country.¹⁴ In addition to this, transfers of weapons to the Houthis by Iran continued even during the ceasefire and may have even increased due to the easing of the siege imposed by the coalition on the Houthis, which, among other things, was intended to prevent transfers of these types of weapons.¹⁵



Weapons seized by US and French forces on January 15, 2023, while thwarting an Iranian attempt to transfer them to the Houthis (CENTCOM's Twitter account, February 1, 2023)

► The ceasefire could collapse at any moment given the great suspicion between the parties and the demands of each side, which are currently not acceptable to the other side.¹⁶ It is estimated that the ceasefire will rise or fall on the issue of the nature of the negotiations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, which is conducting the negotiations and dictates the moves of the Presidential Council. The Houthis demand solutions to the humanitarian crisis and their economic hardships in addition to a clear position of influence in Yemen after the war and the regulation of their relations with Saudi Arabia. Iran's position and its influence on the diplomatic negotiations of the Houthis are not clear for now, but it is evident that it is interested in an arrangement that will preserve its influence in Yemen at the end of the war. Saudi Arabia, which is apparently exhausted from the burden of the long war, is interested in a permanent, long-standing solution that will take it out of the war in a position that will not

¹⁴ On October 21, an attack by Houthi drones was reported near a tanker discharging oil at the oil and gas terminal in Al-Dhabba, in southern Yemen (Al-Arabiya, October 22, 2022); On November 8, a Houthi aircraft was reported to have attacked the Qena oil terminal in southern Yemen (teleSUR English, November 10, 2022); And on November 21, another attack was reported in Al-Dhabba (Reuters, November 21, 2022).

¹⁵ On February 2, 2023, the US Central Command (CENTCOM), which is responsible, among other things, for the Middle East region, announced the thwarting of four attempts by Iran to transfer weapons to the Houthis during the two months prior to the announcement. The last transfer attempt was thwarted by US and French forces on January 15, 2023, in which 23 advanced anti-tank missiles, more than 3,000 assault rifles, and more than half a million bullets were seized (CENTCOM website, February 1, 2023; CNN, February 1, 2023).

¹⁶ For a broad overview of the developments in Yemen in 2022 and the negotiations between the parties, see "How Huthi-Saudi Negotiations Will Make or Break Yemen," International Crisis Group, December 29, 2022.

be interpreted as a defeat. The side consisting of the Presidential Council and the movements opposing the Houthis in Yemen is greatly influenced by Saudi Arabia and is slowly losing its importance in view of the negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. With the damage to its status in the negotiations, cracks are beginning to form in the cohesion of the elements that make up this camp, and this may have an impact on the developments in Yemen. For now, it seems that all parties are waiting for the results of the talks between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia to understand where the conflict is headed.

The Houthi threat to Israel and its implications

► The approach of the Houthis towards Israel is apparently clear given the movement’s motto “Death to America, death to Israel, curse on the Jews, victory for Islam.”¹⁷ Israel is perceived by the Houthis as a hostile country. However, despite the belligerent rhetoric against Israel, it seems that the Houthis are not interested in a direct confrontation with it at this stage, and may not be interested in it in the future either. The military capabilities of the Houthis have greatly strengthened in recent years, but these capabilities have only been directed against the nearest enemies in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In the ITIC’s assessment, Iran’s influence on the Houthis plays a key role in a potential decision to open a direct conflict with Israel. However, it seems that the Houthi movement’s perception of security and strategic conduct somewhat contradicts the open statements on the subject. Currently, there is no information implying Houthi intentions to act against Israel.

The direct threat potential

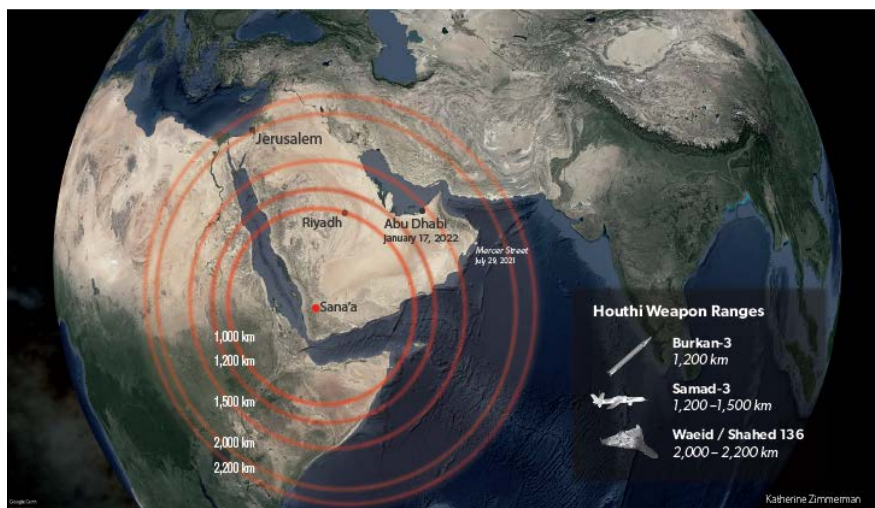
► According to the statements of the Houthis, they have missiles and UAVs that can reach Israeli territory¹⁸ and cause significant damage, such as Quds-2 and Quds-3 missiles, which are claimed to be able to reach a range of 2,000 km, or UAVs such as Sammad-3, Sammad-4, and Waeid, which are claimed to be able to reach ranges of 1,500-2,200 km. The Houthi leadership has repeatedly released threatening announcements in recent years about its willingness to attack Israel,¹⁹ stating however that it will only do so if Israel attacks it first,²⁰ or

¹⁷ The anti-American, anti-Israel and anti-Semitic nature of the Houthis’ slogan corresponds with the Iranian Khomeinist ideology and with the associated slogan that is often heard at rallies in Iran: “Death to Israel; Death to America.”

¹⁸ The distance between the northern border of Yemen and Eilat is about 1,600 km.

¹⁹ In 2019, the Houthis released a video in which they threaten to fire missiles at Israel: <https://www.memri.org/tv/houthi-video-threatening-israel-quds-missile-death-america-iran-yemen-lebanon-arab-leaders>

claiming that it is currently concentrating on other enemies.²¹ In 2021, Israel deployed an Iron Dome battery and a Patriot battery in Eilat due to concern that Iran would try to carry out an attack using missiles or Houthi drones from Yemen on the first anniversary of the killing of Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, and about a month and a half after the killing of the head of Iran's nuclear program, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh (Times of Israel, January 7, 2021).



**Evaluation of the range of the Houthis' weapons
(Katherine Zimmerman's Twitter account, November 17, 2022)**

► In the ITIC's assessment, as long as the Houthis' campaign against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates continues, the Houthis will prefer to use the arsenal of missiles and aircraft in their possession to attack targets in these countries, in addition to targets inside Yemen. In addition to these capabilities, the Houthis have weapons that can hit vessels that make their way to or from Israel, such as anti-ship missiles or suicide vessels. Also, a contemplated possibility was that of Houthi fighters participating in clashes with Israel as part of Palestinian organizations or from Lebanon and Syria.²² Regarding this possibility, it should be noted that the end of the war in Yemen may also encourage fighters who fought in the service of the Houthis to migrate to other conflict zones in the Middle East to utilize their skills.

The indirect threat

²⁰ Houthi military spokesman's statement from November 20, 2019: <https://www.memri.org/tv/houthi-military-spokesman-general-saree-ready-confrontation-israel-strikes-hurt-surprise>

²¹ Statement by a Houthi government official from November 24, 2020: <https://www.memri.org/tv/yemen-houthis-mahbashi-developing-missiles-reach-eilat-saudi-aggression-siege-attacks>

²² Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi himself declared his willingness to send Houthi fighters to assist Hezbollah in the event of a war with Israel (Al-Akhbar, March 23, 2018).

► The Houthis' relationship with Iran could be a fertile ground for cooperation with members of the Axis of Resistance and other anti-Israel organizations. If asked to do so, the Houthis may have the ability to assist Hezbollah in its fight against Israel through logistical or even military support. As mentioned before, it is possible that Hezbollah (as well as Iran) has active representatives in the Houthi government bodies, and these may influence the movement's decision-making. Additionally, even without a direct confrontation between the Houthis and Israel, the war in Yemen could be a testing ground for weapons that may be used in the future to attack Israel by other parties.

► The Houthis also maintain relations with Palestinian organizations such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and there are signs of certain cooperation emerging between these parties as well. The Houthis have often offered to release Saudi prisoners in exchange for the release of Hamas prisoners held in Saudi prisons (al-Monitor, March 31, 2020; al-Monitor, January 5, 2021) and had released announcements about raising funds for the "resistance" to Israel (Ansar Allah, May 11, 2021).

Summary

► Almost 20 years since the beginning of the violent conflict with the central government in Yemen, the Houthi movement finds itself at a crossroads. As a strong regional player that should not be ignored, the movement can establish itself as a leading factor in the institutions of the future government in Yemen, one of its main goals when this conflict began. On the other hand, the strengthening of its military power, its cooperation with Iran, and its position in the Axis of Resistance encourage it to expand its borders within Yemen and even outside of it as well as its regional influence. The current truce period, and the manner in which it will end, will be a significant sign for the movement's future path: will it take advantage of its current achievements to reach a permanent settlement with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and their allies in Yemen; Or will it resume the fighting with the intention of occupying more territories in Yemen and even in Saudi Arabia.

► In the ITIC's assessment, both sides in the war in Yemen are exhausted in the face of long years of heavy losses, a severe humanitarian and economic crisis in Yemen, and severe damage to physical infrastructure as well as to the fighting spirit of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and will strive for calm. **There seems to be a reluctance to resume the fighting, and a willingness to reach a long-term ceasefire or a permanent**

settlement. The key elements in the talks which will largely determine the success of the negotiations are Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. If these parties manage to reach agreements, it is likely that Saudi Arabia's great influence will cause all the other elements in the anti-Houthi camp to align with it due to their dependence on its economic and military capacity. For this purpose, the Houthis would have to compromise in negotiations and agree on a future division of powers between them and the Presidential Council. Iran's influence on the Houthis will also be tested. A Houthi willingness to hold their fire despite Iranian aid and support will indicate that their local-regional interests take precedence over continuing to fight for the Axis of Resistance.