



Washington, D.C.
July 2019

Proxy of Convenience, Alliance of Necessity: How Iran Weaponized Yemen's Houthis

Author: Fatima Abo Alasarar

A shadowy figure in an unadorned tan military uniform sits in a tent next to a whiteboard and a laptop displaying an image of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This man, a Hezbollah commander who goes by the *nom de guerre* "Abu Saleh," is giving a "first level" training course on asymmetric warfare to a group of young Houthi fighters.

"We consider ourselves [Hezbollah] to be an indispensable part of you [the Houthi fighters]," he says, before disclosing plans for a military operation against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

"Did I mention the nature of the operation we will conduct, its objective, or where it will take place?" he asked.

"No," his Houthi disciples answer.

He responds: "You are mujahideen and have no business knowing this."

This remarkable exchange, documented in a 2016 [video](#) recovered by Saudi troops during a raid on a militia camp in the Houthis' home province of Sa'ada is, arguably, one of the first instances affirming Hezbollah's direct support for Yemen's Houthi militias. More importantly, it illustrates the extent to which the Houthis, ever eager to depict themselves as a force for national liberation, have allowed themselves to become another weapon for Iran and Hezbollah's transnational "axis of resistance." While the sudden rupture between the Houthis and former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh at the end of 2017 proved to be the watershed moment in this development, Iran's weaponization of the Houthis was only possible because the Islamic Republic had already spent several years arming and training the group and decades cultivating critical intellectual, cultural, and ideological ties with North Yemen's Zaidi community—the religious sect from which the Houthis originate.

Proxy of Convenience, Alliance of Necessity

Iran's goal in Yemen is twofold. Its initial aim was to prolong Yemen's conflict for as long as possible in order to keep Saudi and Emirati forces bogged down, force them to withdraw, or, at minimum, pay a heavy price for victory. To this end, Hezbollah and Iranian media have given unequivocal [backing](#) for the Houthi "resistance." In addition, they have dispatched experts to improve Houthi combat effectiveness. Israeli media alleges that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps has been working to improve Hezbollah and Houthi missile capabilities and turned North Yemen into a "[testing ground](#) for Hezbollah and Iranian missiles."

The Iranians and Hezbollah have also worked assiduously to prolong or upend negotiations between the Houthis and Yemen's internationally-recognized government. Two high-level sources who wished to remain anonymous because of their direct involvement in UN-brokered negotiations said that during 2016 talks with Yemen's government in Kuwait, Houthi representatives regularly travelled to Lebanon to consult with Hezbollah, returning with new demands that ultimately scuttled the discussions. According to one of these sources, Mohamed Abdulsalam, the chief Houthi negotiator in Kuwait, was initially ecstatic about an informal proposal to end the war, only to report one day later that he had been suddenly instructed not to accept the agreement.

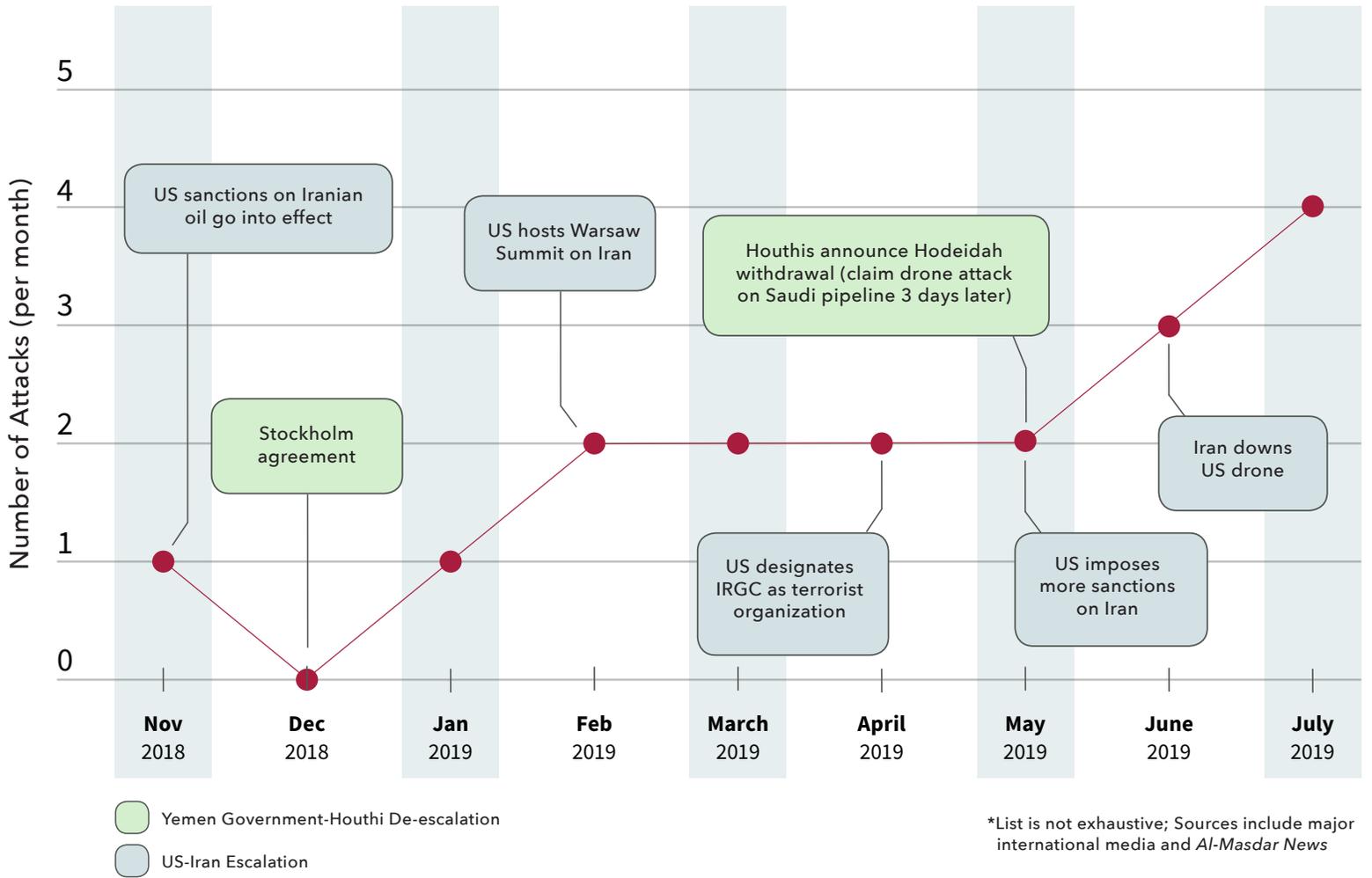
Second, as [tensions](#) with the US have increased, the Islamic Republic has increasingly leveraged the Houthis to showcase its ability to destabilize the Gulf region and threaten global energy markets. On May 5 and 8, the US dispatched an [aircraft carrier group](#) and imposed [new sanctions](#) on Iran. On May 13, four oil tankers were [sabotaged](#) off the Emirati port of Fujairah—an attack the US blamed on Iran. The very next day, the Houthis [claimed credit](#) for a drone attack on Saudi oil infrastructure that was later identified as having originated in Iraq. Then, on May 19, the Houthis pledged to launch [three hundred attacks](#) against targets inside Saudi Arabia. They have started making good on this promise by repeatedly [striking](#) Abha and Jizan airports in the kingdom, a Najran arms depot, ships traveling in the Red Sea, and other targets.

For Tehran, the Houthis are, arguably, the most convenient proxy to leverage in their current conflict with the US. Unlike Hezbollah or the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, Iran has hidden its support for the Houthis and [vehemently denies](#) backing the group. In addition, activating either Hezbollah in Syria or the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq risks bringing Iran's proxies into direct conflict with American forces—a conflict that could quickly escalate and cost Iran its hard-fought gains in both countries. Conversely, outside of combatting al-Qaeda and ISIS, the US has no direct strategic stake in Yemen's war (which is probably why Iran was all too pleased to have the Houthis take credit for the May 14 drone attack).

"For Tehran, the Houthis are, arguably, the most convenient proxy to leverage in their current conflict with the US."

Major Houthi Attacks Outside of Yemen

As the Houthi-Yemen Government Conflict De-escalates Inside of Yemen



But it can be argued that the Houthis' increasing proximity to Iran has cost them at home. The timing of the Houthis' claiming responsibility for the drone attack immediately undercut their successful renegotiation of a [UN-sponsored mutual withdrawal](#) from three Yemeni ports, a negotiation that had not only won them goodwill with the international community but also left their forces in a strategically advantageous position.

In fact, since May, Western media and the UN, both of which have traditionally placed the onus for Yemen's humanitarian catastrophe on the Saudi-led coalition's air campaign, have begun turning a more critical eye toward the Houthis' malign activities—most notably its recent decision to [execute](#) thirty journalists and an activist, its continued [targeting](#) of humanitarian aid, and its intransigence regarding negotiations over the port city of Hodeida. Equally significant, senior sources directly involved in the Hodeida discussions have said privately that the Houthi leadership's decision to claim responsibility for the Iraq attack did not sit well with some members of the group who fear that the organization has become too deferential to Iran.

If the Iranian connection is damaging the Houthis' carefully cultivated international standing, alienating a friendly UN, and sowing division within the ranks, why then has Houthi leader Abdel-Malik al-Houthi invested so much in this relationship? The most plausible explanation is that al-Houthi's actions have systematically alienated nearly every single Yemeni ally the organization once had, leaving Iran and its transnational network as its sole source of support. The Houthis' forced [conscription](#) of Yemeni adults and children as young as ten into military service, as well as a [draconian tax regime](#) with levies on staples such as [cooking gas](#)—which Yemenis are only eligible to receive after they have paid zakat (religious tithe) to the Houthis—have disaffected most of the group's North Yemeni tribal base. But it was al-Houthi's decision to [execute](#) former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in December 2017 that deprived the Houthis of their only Yemeni ally with a national footprint and permanently alienated most of Saleh's party, the General People's Congress (GPC), which had served as a key pillar of military and bureaucratic support during the Houthi takeover.

With the loss of the GPC, the Houthis' have relied more and more on Hezbollah and Iran. To this end, al-Houthi has, despite persistent denials from Tehran, worked to solidify his organization's relationship with the Islamic Republic and its allies. Houthi spokesperson Mohamed Abdulsalam has met openly with Iran's foreign minister, [Javad Zarif](#), and has posted pictures of his meetings with Hezbollah leaders on [his Twitter page](#). During an April 22 [interview](#) on Almasirah TV, the Houthis' main media outlet,

"...al-Houthi's actions have systematically alienated nearly every single Yemeni ally the organization once had, leaving Iran and its transnational network as its sole source of support."

al-Houthi made it clear that his movement and Hezbollah share "the same vision." Similarly, senior Houthi officials have begun warning of a looming ["great war"](#) between the Iran-Hezbollah-Houthi-led axis of resistance and the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

In addition, Abdel-Malik al-Houthi has taken to mimicking Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's rhetoric during [speeches](#), railing against the global threat posed by "Americanism and Zionism" as well as Arab Gulf States' "complicity with the West." At the end of Ramadan this year, the Houthis organized a national [fundraiser](#) urging impoverished Yemenis to help "pay back" Hezbollah—[cash-starved](#) thanks to US sanctions—for its "support."

But al-Houthi has gone even further, dropping any pretense of fighting on behalf of all Yemenis and actively working to reshape North Yemeni society in an image better suited to the axis of resistance. In his sermons, al-Houthi now [articulates](#) a new insular, highly-sectarian, and xenophobic Yemeni identity. The Houthis have also radicalized school [curricula](#). Students in Houthi schools are now taught that any Sunni Muslim who opposes the Houthi mission, as well as all Baha'is—whom the Islamic Republic consider heretics—are apostates and that waging jihad against these enemies of Yemen is obligatory.

Iran Steps Up, Decades After it Stepped In

Iran's weaponization of the Houthis was immediately preceded by a dramatic uptick in material support for the group. In the fall of 2014 the Houthis, in coordination with former President Saleh and his supporters, [seized control](#) of most state institutions, including the military. For the next year, the Houthis relied primarily on the Yemeni military's arsenal to wage their offensive. Over time, this began to change. According to the [UN](#), between 2015 and 2016, the Houthis suddenly began importing "complete or partially assembled weapons systems supplied from abroad, such as extended-range short-range ballistic missiles."

At the time of Saleh's death in 2017, the Houthi arsenal had grown to include waterborne IEDs, anti-ship cruise missiles, [anti-tank guided missiles](#), and [ballistic missiles](#). One year later, they were [deploying](#) "extended-range unmanned aerial vehicles" manufactured with imported "high-value components" which "would allow the Houthi forces to strike targets deep into Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates." The UN also reported that the Houthi drone, the Qasef-1, has "characteristics similar to Iranian-made Ababil-2/T" and has identified Iranian shell companies, which were illegally [sending fuel](#) to Yemen where it was subsequently sold to fund the Houthi war effort.

But Iran's ability to offer and then dramatically upscale its assistance would not have been possible without its decades-long effort to cultivate cultural, intellectual, and ideological ties with Yemen's Zaidi community. In the years following the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic worked to realign the Zaidi current—typically seen as existing between Sunnism and Shiism—with Khomeinism (a revolutionary form of Twelver Shiism).

Mohammed Izzan, a leading Zaidi scholar, has documented these efforts at length. According to Izzan, in the 1980s and 1990s, the Islamic Republic dispatched Khomeinist scholars to North Yemen and paid for Yemeni Zaidi religious students to study in Qom. While in Iran, many of these students, including Twelver scholar and Houthi ally Issam al-Imad, converted to Shi'ism and adopted Khomeinist ideas. In addition, Iran attempted to forge ties with Zaidi political parties, such as al-Haq, which was also co-founded by Hussein al-Houthi (for whom the "Houthis" get their namesake).

Separately, a few Zaidis, alarmed at the rapid spread of Sunni Salafism in North Yemen, began independently forming cultural associations in order to preserve the Zaidi identity. Mohammed Izzan and Hussein al-Houthi (for whom the "Houthis" get their namesake), co-founded one of these groups: the Believing Youth.

Hussein al-Houthi subscribed to a sub-current of Zaidi thought which posited that Yemen could only be ruled by Zaidi Hashemites (descendants of the Prophet) like himself. As he grew more radical, the elder al-Houthi dreamt of resurrecting the Zaidi imamate, the theocratic kingdom which had ruled Yemen for centuries until it was overthrown in the 1962 revolution that brought Ali Abdullah Saleh to power.

Sources close to Hussein al-Houthi confirmed that he lived in Iran for a brief time in the 1990s (his father was also reported to have lived there). In the Islamic Republic, al-Houthi saw a model to emulate: a revolutionary and independent theocratic power which had defied the US imperial order and achieved global recognition. He and his followers split from the rest of the Believing Youth. Their group, most recently rebranded as Ansarallah (partisans of God), set out to establish a new theocracy in North Yemen, adopting a Khomeinist slogan—"God is great, death to the US, death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam"—as its own.

As both Houthi and Iranian influence grew, Zaidism in North Yemen began to change. Zaidis started commemorating Shi'a religious holidays, such as [Ashura and Eid al-Ghadeer](#), as well as Khomeinist ones, such as [al-](#)

"But Iran's ability to offer and then dramatically upscale its assistance would not have been possible without its decades-long effort to cultivate cultural, intellectual, and ideological ties with Yemen's Zaidi community."

[Quds Day](#). Over time, the line between Khomeinism and Zaidism became blurry. "We believe that Khomeini was a true Zaidi," al-Haq leader and Houthi minister Hassan Zaid [told](#) scholar Mehdi Khalaji in 2015. "Theologically our differences with Hezbollah and the Iranian government are minor, but politically we are identical."

Once the Houthis seized power, they claimed the Zaidi mantle as their own. This sharpened the divide between all Zaidis and Yemen's other faiths. "There were and still are Zaidis who criticize [the Houthis]," Mohammed Izzan told me. "But, after [the Houthis] seized power, this [criticism] decreased dramatically." At the same time, many non-Houthi Zaidis now feel that they are targeted because of their faith, he added.

Conclusion

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Iran continues to deny its role in perpetuating Yemen's civil war. Unfortunately, much of the international community has gone along with this farce, enabling the Islamic Republic to continue using the Houthis to threaten shipping in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and wage attacks with impunity. Over the past few months, the UN and Western media have rightly begun shining a more critical light on the Houthis' actions. They should subject Iran's role in abetting the Yemeni conflict to the same scrutiny.

Meanwhile, Abdel-Malik al-Houthi is in denial. He has concocted a story for his followers in which the Houthis made a "moral choice" to voluntarily join with those fighting the enemies of Islam. In this upside-down fairy-tale Houthi dependence on Iran and Hezbollah is the surest path to an independent Yemen and weaponization in Iran's transnational arsenal is the quickest way to securing national objectives. Al-Houthi has sold his cause, his people, and his country to Hezbollah operatives like Abu Saleh who would gladly sacrifice every Houthi fighter just to bleed Iran's enemies and show the Islamic Republic's Arab Gulf adversaries that the US cannot effectively protect them. While this decision may militarily strengthen the Houthis in the short-term, in the long-term it risks utterly discrediting the movement in the eyes of the UN, the international community, and the few Yemenis that still support them.



Author:

Fatima Abo Alasarar

Brandon Beardsley and Josh Morales contributed to this report

Copyright © 2019 Arabia Foundation

1779 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 805
Washington, DC 20036

For Media Queries:

Malak Al Kaud
media@arabiafoundation.org
202-845-8531

Follow Us:

 @ArabiaFdn

 /ArabiaFoundation