

DEFENSE & SECURITY

The Evolution of the Iran-Houthis Partnership and Its Implications for Yemen and Regional Dynamics

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For eight years, beginning in early 2015, Saudi Arabia and Iran supported opposing parties in the Yemeni conflict – the internationally recognized government and the Houthi armed group respectively. While the Saudi investment failed to pay off due to the government’s limited credibility, scarce legitimacy, and deep internal divisions, the Iranian investment proved highly beneficial, allowing Tehran to put pressure on its Saudi rival, project its influence throughout the Sunni Gulf, and secure access to the Red Sea.

Last March, then, Tehran and Riyadh took most observers by surprise as they signed a reconciliation agreement that put an end to their 7-year-long diplomatic crisis. According to the deal, Iran committed to cease its support for its Yemeni ally. Considering the value that the partnership with the Houthis has for Iran, though, questions remain on whether Tehran will indeed comply with its commitment and the implications that this will have for Yemen and the broader regional dynamics.

Iran and the Houthis: When and How It All Began

According to the United Nations, it was 2009 when [Iran started to provide weapons to the Houthis](#). At that time, the Houthis (a Zaydi Shia movement from Yemen’s Northern Sa’ada governorate) were engaged in a series of military confrontations against the Yemeni government, led by President Ali Abdullah Saleh and ultimately supported by Saudi Arabia. In those earliest days, however, Iran’s weapons shipments were limited, sporadic, and inconsequential – a reflection of the marginal place that Yemen was occupying in Iran’s regional priorities.

Four years later, however, in the context of deep instability that came to characterize the post-Arab Spring years in Yemen, concerns about the relationship between Tehran and the Houthis increased when a joint operation by the US Navy and the Yemeni coastguard [intercepted the *Jihan I*, an Iranian vessel](#), in Yemeni territorial waters. A subsequent report by a UN panel of experts concluded that the weapons found on the *Jihan I* (such as ammunition, man-portable air defense systems, rockets, and rocket-propelled grenade launchers) were boarded in Iran and destined for the Houthis.

In 2014, the concerns raised by the *Jihan I* episode were made more acute by developments in Yemen. In September of that year, the Houthis – surprisingly allied with former President Saleh – launched an insurgency that saw them bring under their control the entirety of northern Yemen and the capital Sana’a. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia placed itself at the head of a (miscalculated) [military intervention in Yemen](#) aimed at overthrowing the Houthis and reinstating Hadi. In Saudi Arabia, in fact, the presence of a Shia armed group determined to overthrow the existing status quo in a neighboring country with which it shares a 1,307 km long border was seen as a major security threat. The suspicion that the group was receiving support from Iran was only adding to the threat.

It was in the background of these events that Iran commenced to look at Yemen with greater interest. In fact, as the Houthis conquered Sana’a and the Saudis were getting increasingly worried about the turn that events were taking in Yemen, Iran came to [increasingly appreciate the opportunity](#) to support the Houthis, indirectly pressure and threaten Saudi Arabia, and expand Iranian influence into the Red Sea. As of late-2014, reports began to emerge on increased levels of Iranian assistance to the Houthis.

Houthi-Iranian Partnership: a Mutually Beneficial, Multidimensional Alliance

As far as Iranian assistance to the Houthis is concerned, this involves the [transfer of weapons](#) and weapons parts, but also [training](#) aimed at building and strengthening the Houthis’ military capacities. In terms of warfare, thanks to the support from Iran – and most prominently Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) – and thanks to the support of Iran’s ally Hezbollah, the Houthis have turned into a more sophisticated and more effective armed force, which has proved itself able to [launch attacks](#) against its Gulf neighbors and strike

ground as well as maritime targets. The support from Iran also helped the Houthis to build their own weapons factories and [manufacture weapons locally](#), as was in full display during the Houthi's annual parade in Sana'a last September. Strong of the Iranian guidance, the Houthis also forged new military institutions in Yemen, such as the [powerful Jihad Council](#).

Besides, Iran has been providing the Houthis with diplomatic support, formally recognizing the Houthis' government and [welcoming a Houthi ambassador to Tehran](#). On this same line, the Houthi's official media outlet, *Al-Masirah*, has its headquarters in a part of Beirut controlled by Hezbollah and benefits from the technical assistance of Hezbollah's *Al-Manar*. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that Houthi-Hezbollah ties have become particularly prominent, as the two movements [increasingly cooperate in weapons smuggling](#) and Hezbollah-linked advisors have contributed to the Houthis' military training.

Beyond military capacities, the partnership between the Houthis and Iran has come to influence the ideological sphere as well. Over time, in fact, the Houthis have progressively introduced a series of [cultural and religious practices](#) that have no clear link with the history of Zaydism in Yemen, while they have a [clear connection with Twelver Shiism](#) and with Khomeini's religious-political ideology. This is most evident in the introduction in Houthi-controlled territories of the commemorations of *Ashura* (the mourning of the martyrdom of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed) and Jerusalem International Day (a yearly event declared by Khomeini to express support for the Palestinian cause and oppose Israel and Zionism), as well as the declaration of *Eid al-Ghadir* (celebrated by Shia Muslims as the day the Prophet Mohammed designated his son-in-law Ali as his successor to the caliphate) official holiday, inclusive of compulsory rallies. Besides, it is also noticeable that the Houthis have progressively embraced anti-imperialistic, revolutionary, and anti-Semitic rhetoric.

As the partnership between Tehran and the Houthis consolidated, many began to see the Zaydi group [as an Iranian proxy](#). However, while the ties between the two are certainly solid and significant, the Houthis are more of an Iranian ally than an Iranian proxy. The group, in fact, has been using the ties with Iran to advance its own interests and there is no evidence that the Houthis take orders from Tehran or that their policies are dramatically shaped by Iran. Moreover, Iranian support never influenced the Houthis' fundamental objectives as much as it

did not influence the group's willingness to remain locally anchored. As such, while part of the Iranian-led Shia "axis of resistance",^[1] the Houthis differentiate themselves from a group such as Hezbollah in its relations with Iran.

If the Houthis have been benefitting from Iran's support in terms of military arsenal, warfare skills (regular and irregular), weapons production capacity, and propaganda expertise, Iran has also been reaping benefits from the partnership. Specifically, the Houthis' continued control over the northern half of Yemen has allowed Tehran to [put pressure on Saudi Arabia at a limited cost](#), while Riyadh got itself stuck into a stalemated military confrontation that exacted a high financial price and had a harmful impact on the kingdom's international image. Moreover, the [Houthis' presence in Hodeida](#), has also allowed Iran to gain indirect access to the Red Sea, which Iran sees as a crucial maritime route to smuggle weapons to its allies in **Iraq, Syria, Lebanon**, and Gaza.

Tehran-Riyadh Deal and What to Expect Next from the Iranian-Houthi Partnership

On the last 10th of March, representatives of Iran and Saudi Arabia, announced a [Chinese-sponsored agreement to restore diplomatic relations](#). While tensions between them have dominated the regional political landscape for more than 40 years, the formal severance of relations came in January 2016, when the execution in Saudi Arabia of a prominent Shia cleric, Nimr al-Nimr, was followed by [anti-Saudi protests in Iran](#) that culminated with the Saudi Embassy in Tehran set on fire. While a discussion of the [reasons that led to the agreement](#) lies beyond the scope of this article, two considerations can be made in this regard: the Saudis, eager to put an end to their disastrous Yemeni campaign and focus their financial resources on the advancement of Vision 2030, have been actively pursuing a negotiated end to the war in Yemen for the past year, while the Iranians, threatened by months of unprecedented mass protests against the government and by years of painful isolation, have been actively trying to strengthen their position within the region, promote regional convergence, and reconcile with the Gulf Cooperation Council bloc ("neighborhood policy").

As part of the agreement, Saudi Arabia reportedly committed to abandon its support for influential media outlets that have incited the crowds against the Iranian regime. For its part, Iran reportedly committed to stop arms shipments to the Houthis (ironically, after years spent

claiming that it never supplied weapons to the group) and to discourage the Houthis from launching further attacks against Saudi Arabia.

This, however, should not be taken as an indication that the Iranian-Houthi partnership is going to end or even change in any significant way. Firstly, Iran sees its axis of resistance as a fundamental [pillar of its deterrence](#) in the region. This makes Tehran very much unlikely to sever, or downgrade, the relationship with its Yemeni ally, as that would negatively affect the reach and effectiveness of the axis. In other words, as the relationship with the Houthis is meaningful for Tehran not only in the context of Yemen but also in the broader regional context, it can hardly be expected that Tehran will renounce to expand it further. If anything, it can be expected that Iran will rely more on the relationships between the axis' various components, meaning that the role of Hezbollah, and possibly other Iranian-linked armed groups, in supporting the Houthis might progressively grow. Moreover, while Iran's relationship with the Saudis is entering a new chapter, the possibility of reversals can never be excluded. Therefore, for Iran, having the Houthis as a close ally in Yemen, capable of pressuring the Saudis when and as needed and capable of projecting Iranian influence throughout the southern Gulf peninsula, is too valuable to let go. Finally, and as mentioned above, the Iranian-Houthi partnership provides Iran with indirect access to that crucial maritime route that is the Red Sea – access that Iran is determined to maintain by means of cultivating its relationship with the Houthis.

As both Iran and the Houthis seem determined to continue to invest in their traditional partnership, questions remain on how this will affect the Tehran-Riyadh rapprochement. For the moment being, however, the Saudis' priorities in Yemen are to reach an agreement with the Houthis, receive guarantees on security along the Saudi-Yemeni border, and definitively withdraw from the Yemeni quagmire.

Determined to leave a conflict that has long become an unsustainable and infructuous expenditure of resources, Riyadh appears ready (or at least resigned) to accept the institutionalization of the Houthis' political and military power in the north of Yemen. As long as Iran can guarantee that the Houthis will refrain from attacking Saudi targets, that might be satisfactory enough for Riyadh.

In other words, in the current circumstances, it seems that the Saudis recognize that they do not have many options on their table, other than accepting the reality of the Iranian-Houthi ties and capitalizing on the agreement with Iran to at least obtain guarantees on their country's security.

[\[1\]](#) The term refers to a network of political parties and armed groups that span Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. It is operationally supported by the Quds Force, a prominent unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

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