

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Iran's Fingerprints in Yemen

## Real or Imagined?

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The current conflict in Yemen has many complex components and competing factions, but the main two “sides” are the Houthis aligned with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh (hereafter referred to simply as “the Houthis”) versus the internationally recognized government of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. While the roots of the conflict are deep, the current hostilities began when the Houthis, a conglomeration of various political and tribal groupings from Yemen’s north named after their former leader Hussein al-Houthi (d. 2004), overran Yemen’s capital, Sana’a, in September 2014 and forced the president from power in January 2015. As the Houthis continued their march south to take over more of the country, the president fled to Saudi Arabia in March 2015 and requested Saudi help to restore his government.

It is tempting to cast the conflict as both a sectarian and proxy war, since the Houthis adhere to a branch of Shi’ism and are vocally supported by Shia Iran, while the Yemeni government is backed militarily by a coalition of Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia. One of Saudi Arabia’s main stated objectives when it launched its military intervention in Yemen in March 2015 was to contain the growing influence of Iran, which it believed to be aiding the Houthis.

There are several challenges to unraveling the true extent of Iran’s fingerprints in Yemen. It is easy to construct convincing arguments either way—showing either the strong hand of Iran in arming and training the Houthis or the spectacular lack of it. This can be done simply by being selective over which of the mixed messages coming out of Iran to present, by citing circumstantial evidence as though it were hard fact, or, conversely, by dismissing strongly suggestive evidence owing to plausible deniability.

This paper attempts to steer a neutral line and to present evidence and hypotheses that point in different directions. It does, however, try to draw a balanced conclusion and offer a possible analysis as to the extent of Iran’s influence thus far, as well as a trajectory for where it might be heading. This is done by tackling a series of questions: Is the war sectarian? Does Iran control the Houthis? To what extent is Iran’s



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role rhetorical rather than action based, and how might contradictory messages coming out of Iran be reconciled? Why might Iran, and indeed its opponents, have talked up its role? Finally, to what extent are Iran and its proxy Lebanese Hezbollah actually arming and training the Houthis? Has Iran's input been significant enough to change the dynamics of the conflict, or might the Houthis conceivably have managed thus far without decisive input from Iran?

### Is the War Sectarian?

It is easy to frame the Yemen conflict as a sectarian battle between Sunnis and Shias. While the Houthis are primarily a political rather than religious grouping, religious conviction played an important role in the formation of Houthi identity politics. The Houthis are predominantly Zaydis, an offshoot of Shi'ism but one that is markedly different from the "Twelver" Shi'ism of Iran. Zaydis comprise over one-third of Yemen's population of twenty-seven million. The Houthis' mobilization began in the early 1990s as a cultural revivalist movement, fighting to push back influence campaigns of Saudi-backed Wahhabis and local Salafis' to win recognition for Zaydis and end their economic and political marginalization.<sup>2</sup> Their political arm today is known as Ansar Allah (Partisans of God).

However, the current conflict was not motivated by religion. Yemen is not a naturally sectarian country and the two main sides in today's war do not divide neatly along sectarian lines. Not all Zaydis support the Houthis, and the Houthi forces today also include some Sunni fighters aligned with former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Houthis' stated goal as they swept south and took over Yemen's capital in September 2014 was to stand against corrupt and ineffective government. In the face of massive hikes in the fuel price, power cuts, and widespread government corruption, many Yemenis who were neither Houthi nor Zaydi (Shia) supported the Houthis in this ambition.

Conversely, it is important to note that most of those fighting *against* the Houthis are not doing so for sectarian religious reasons, with the obvious exception

of militant jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY).<sup>3</sup> Nor are the Yemeni opponents of the Houthis—whether military, tribal, or southern separatist—necessarily fighting out of loyalty to the internationally recognized government of President Hadi. Like the Houthis, they too are motivated by local reasons related to the control of power, territory, and resources, and in some cases simply a salary.

### Does Iran Control the Houthis?

If the Houthi ascent was not driven primarily by Shia religious motivation, what then, if any, is the nature of the Houthi link to Iran? There is no doubt that the Houthis can be considered part of a broad pro-Iran constellation in the Middle East, which also comprises Lebanese Hezbollah, significant elements of the Iraqi government, the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, and—tangentially—Russia. The Houthi motto, "God Is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, God Curse the Jews, Victory to Islam," bears more than a passing resemblance to the motto of revolutionary Iran. Moreover, pictures of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei as well as Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah have been carried by the crowds at Houthi demonstrations.

Yet this shared hatred of America and Israel, together with some Houthis' admiration for Shia leaders, does not translate into the Houthis being an Iranian proxy. During the six rounds of war that the Houthis fought with the Yemen government (2004-10), there was little evidence to back up the latter's claims that the Houthis were being assisted by Iran. One US embassy cable records that staff "did not find any evidence to support allegations of links between the insurrectionists and Iran"<sup>4</sup> although other cables acknowledge some scholarly ties between Iran and the Houthis and possible limited financial support from nongovernmental Iranian groups.<sup>5</sup> More recent evidence from interviews with Houthis suggests that

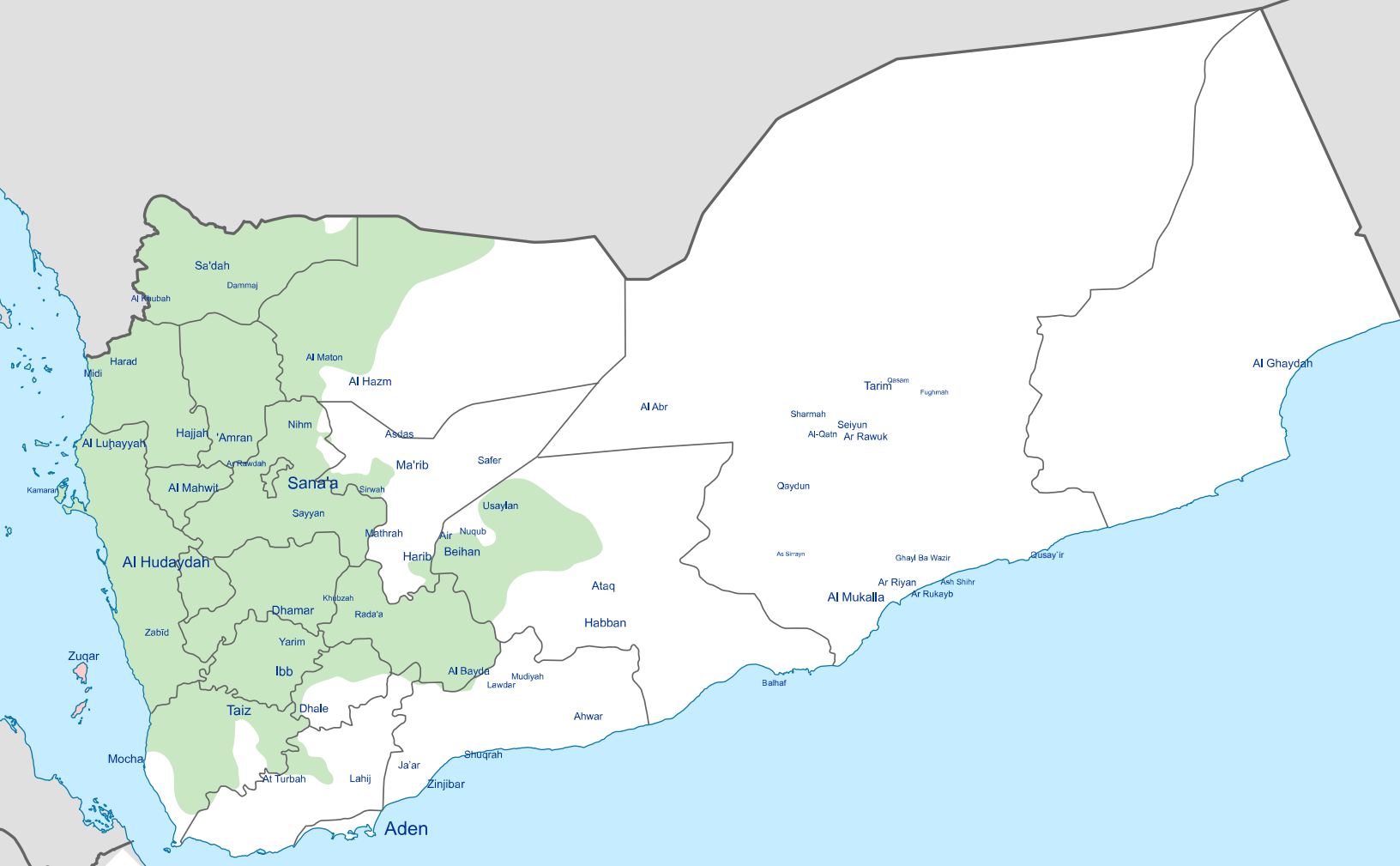
1 Shelagh Weir provides several early examples of such campaigns in her book *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

2 International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, Middle East Report No. 86, May 27, 2009, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-defusing-saada-time-bomb>, 8.

3 For a brief account of AQAP and ISY sectarian narratives, see Elisabeth Kendall, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Yemen: A Battle for Local Audiences" in Simon Staffell and Akil Awan (eds.), *Jihadism Transformed* (London: Hurst, 2016), 89-122: 101-3.

4 Cable O7SANAA297\_a, US Embassy in Sana'a, WikiLeaks, February 26, 2007, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/O7SANAA297\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/O7SANAA297_a.html).

5 Cable O9SANAA1662\_a, US Embassy in Sana'a, WikiLeaks, September 12, 2009, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/O9SANAA1662\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/O9SANAA1662_a.html).



Map of the territory controlled by the Revolutionary Committee in Yemen, according to published reports.  
*Credit: Ali Zifan/Wikimedia.*

Iran does not enjoy command and control over them.<sup>6</sup> This is also supported by reports that the Houthis ignored Iranian advice not to take over Yemen's capital in 2014,<sup>7</sup> although the contextual details of this advice have not been reported so it is unclear whether Iran's reported objection was a matter of timing or a matter of principle.

The Houthis themselves deny being an Iranian proxy but have generally admitted to some limited Iranian backing based on a shared hatred of America.<sup>8</sup> When

the Houthis took over Yemen's capital in September 2014, it is often reported that daily flights began between Iran and Yemen, leading to allegations that Iranian advisers and weapons were being brought in. In reality, the flights never materialized as the war broke out in earnest, putting the airport out of action. Houthi activist Hussein al-Bukhaiti dispelled the notion of any Iranian plot for Shia domination, logically pointing out, "We cannot apply this [Iranian] system in Yemen because the followers of the Shafi'i doctrine [Sunnis] are greater in number than the Zaydis [Shias]."<sup>9</sup>

It seems likely that the Houthis have a pragmatic attitude towards Iran. They are willing to accept help in their fight as long as it suits them. This notion of Houthi pragmatism is also borne out by their improbable alliance with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh,

6 Safa Al Ahmad, "Rise of the Houthis," BBC Documentary, March 21, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31994769>.

7 Ali Watkin, Ryan Grim, and Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "Iran Warned Houthis against Yemen Takeover," *The Huffington Post*, April 20, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/20/iran-houthis-yemen\\_n\\_7101456.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/20/iran-houthis-yemen_n_7101456.html); April Longley Alley and Joost Hiltermann, "The Houthis Are Not Hezbollah," *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/27/the-houthis-are-not-hezbollah/>.

8 Shahir Shahidsaleh, "Does Iran Really Control Yemen?" *al-Monitor* online, February 12, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/iran-yemen-houthis-axis-of-resistance.html>; Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, "Iranian Support Seen as Crucial for Yemen's Houthis," *Reuters*, December 15, 2015, <http://>

[www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-houthis-iran-insight-idUSKB-NOJT17A20141215](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-houthis-iran-insight-idUSKB-NOJT17A20141215).

9 "Al-Bukhaiti to the Yemen Times: The Houthis' Takeover Can Not Be Called an Invasion," *The Yemen Times*, October 21, 2014, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1826/interview/4467/Al-Bukhaiti-to-the-Yemen-Times-%E2%80%9CThe-Houthis%E2%80%99-takeover-can-not-be-called-an-invasion%E2%80%9D.htm>.

previously their arch enemy who had fought six rounds of war against them. It is a marriage of convenience, bringing to the Houthis military hardware, expertise, and personnel as well as extended support among tribes loyal to Saleh.

In short, the rise of the Houthis' political arm, Ansar Allah, over the past decade and the growing regional influence of Iran have been concomitant rather than inextricably linked.<sup>10</sup> This view of the Houthi rebellion as motivated by domestic politics rather than religion, and only marginally connected to Iran, is borne out by many Yemen scholars.<sup>11</sup> In other words, with or without Iran's involvement, the underlying structure of the conflict would likely be the same.

### What Is Iran's Role? Rhetoric versus Action

This does not mean that Iran is not providing support to the Houthis to fuel a domestically generated conflict. Iran freely admits that it considers the Houthis to be the legitimate authority currently within Yemen, as opposed to the broader international community, which considers the Houthi sweep to power to be illegitimate, as outlined in United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2216. However, it is important to distinguish between rhetoric and action—between what Iran says and what Iran actually does.

With regard to rhetoric, numerous Iranians close to the regime have boasted of Iran's influence in Yemen. Such statements include: "Three Arab capitals have today ended up in the hands of Iran" and Sana'a is to become the fourth (Ali Reza Zakani, Tehran Parliamentarian, September 2014); Iran's influence "stretches to the Mediterranean coasts and Bab al-Mandab," the crucial shipping route directly off the coast of Yemen (Ali Said, the supreme leader's representative in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), October 2014); Iran's influence reaches "from Yemen to Lebanon" (Ali

"... [W]ith or without Iran's involvement, the underlying structure of the conflict would likely be the same."

Akbar Velayati, foreign affairs adviser to Khamenei, December 2014); "our revolution is exported to Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq" (Ali Akbar Nategh-Nuri, head of the supreme leader's Office of Inspection, January 2015); "Ansar Allah is a similar copy of Hezbollah" (IRGC Brig. Gen. Hossein Salami, January 2015); and "Hezbollah was formed in Lebanon as a popular force like Basij [Iran's militia]. Similarly, popular forces were also formed in Syria and Iraq, and today we are watching the formation of Ansar Allah in Yemen" (Hojatoleislam Ali Shirazi, representative of the supreme leader to Iran's Quds Force, January 2015).

### Why Might Iran Have Talked Up Its Role?

It is, of course, in Iran's interests to play up its hand in Yemen for several reasons related to regional power politics. For Iran to achieve its goals, it does not necessarily need to supply much to the Houthis in the way of expensive weapons and advisers; it simply needs to create the perception of this. Iran's regional clout is naturally increased if it is deemed to have some influence over the outcome of the Yemen conflict and hence also over the security of economically vital Red Sea shipping routes. This will worry international audiences, please domestic hardliners, and increase Iran's standing as a key regional stakeholder.

Moreover, antagonizing Saudi Arabia into embroiling itself in an expensive, complicated, and possibly unwinnable war brings several advantages for Iran. First, it drains Saudi finances. Second, it keeps Saudi Arabia preoccupied to its south and thus precludes its deeper involvement in the Syrian war, where Iran is trying to prop up the Assad regime, much hated by Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Iran's limited financial and material resources mean that it must focus on the axis nearest to it, that of Lebanon-Syria-Iraq. It therefore makes sense for Iran to project its hand in Yemen via rhetoric rather than to divert significant resources to it.

Third, it damages Saudi Arabia's international credibility. The humanitarian disaster resulting from the current war is becoming increasingly urgent and

10 Emile Hokayem and David Roberts, "The War in Yemen," *Survival* 58, no. 6 (December 2016–January 2017): 157–186: 162.

11 Laurent Bonnefoy, "Les faux-semblant de la guerre au Yemen," *Esprit*, September 2016, 7–10: 8; Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "The Limits of the 'Sectarian' Framing in Yemen," *Washington Post*, September 25, 2014; Charles Schmitz, "The Huthi Ascent to Power," The Middle East Institute, September 15, 2014, <http://www.mei.edu/content/at/huthi-ascent-power>; Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2016): 647–63; Laurent Amelot, "Yemen: une guerre saoudienne contre l'Iran," *Outre-Terre* 44 (March 2015): 329–38; Mareike Transfeld, "Iran's Small Hand in Yemen," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 14, 2017; Hokayem and Roberts, "The War in Yemen," 158.

is largely associated with poorly targeted Saudi air strikes and the Saudi naval blockade on Yemen. The blockade, ostensibly to prevent the supply of arms to the Houthis, has given Iran the opportunity to cast itself in the role of the humanitarian and Saudi Arabia in the role of an aggressor intent on starving and bombing its southern neighbor. For example, in April 2015, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused Saudi Arabia of committing war crimes in Yemen (this view has subsequently been echoed by many voices in the international community) and in May 2015 Iran sent a ship allegedly laden with humanitarian aid to Yemen that was predictably turned away.<sup>12</sup>

One further reason why Iran might intentionally seek to talk up its involvement in Yemen relates to strategic positioning. Iran now has the Yemen card to play as a token of conciliation and compromise, if required. Iran can potentially claim to be pulling back from Yemen when in reality this may not be a significant concession. An Iranian political analyst close to President Hassan Rouhani reportedly said "Iran did not have a huge influence in Yemen but seems ready for a compromise by cutting its help to the Houthis."<sup>13</sup> He concluded that Yemen, rather than Syria, is now "the easiest compromise" if Iran needs to decrease tension with Saudi Arabia.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth noting that all of the aggressive rhetorical statements cited above were made prior to March 2015 when Saudi Arabia launched its military intervention in Yemen. Subsequent to Saudi Arabia's decision to enter the fray, the statements coming out of Tehran have tended to take a less bellicose and more self-righteous tone that frames Iran as the champion of an oppressed population. It is unclear whether this subtle shift in emphasis forms part of a previously calculated strategy, having succeeded in embroiling Saudi Arabia in the war, or springs from genuine concern for the increasing Houthi plight. But it is worth pointing out that the possibility that Iran is simply using the conflict to its own advantage without significantly assisting the Houthis even drove one member of the Houthi Revolutionary Committee to comment in March 2016

that Iran should stop its "exploitation of the Yemen file."<sup>15</sup>

### Why Might Iran's Opponents Talk Up Iran's Role?

Iran is not the only one to benefit from emphasizing its role. The Yemeni government has long attempted to cast the Houthis in the role of Iranian proxy—trained, armed, and ideologically influenced by Iran.<sup>16</sup> This would encourage greater military support and funding from Saudi Arabia and its Sunni Gulf allies. WikiLeaks cables indicate that such claims were treated with skepticism by the United States and by some in Saudi Arabia too, at least until 2009. One cable refers to the view that Saleh, Yemen's president at the time, might be "providing false or exaggerated information on Iranian assistance to the Houthis in order to enlist direct Saudi involvement and regionalize the conflict."<sup>17</sup>

For its part, Saudi Arabia now harbors a genuine fear of Iranian encirclement. Iran is heavily involved to Saudi Arabia's north, in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Saudi Arabia does not want Iran to gain a foothold on its southern border too. During a Track 2 dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia, facilitated by German academics in 2016, it became clear that the Saudi delegates considered Iran to be a major geopolitical threat to its territory, regional influence, and relationships with key Western countries. Iranian delegates, by contrast, did not see Saudi Arabia as a threat.<sup>18</sup> The talks also concluded that "Yemen is of much higher importance to Saudi Arabia than it is for Iran. . . . Symbolic and financial support for the Houthis, a group Iran believes has been oppressed by the Yemeni political order, is not as resolute as Iran's support for Hizballah in Lebanon or the Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq."<sup>19</sup> The Iranian threat, whether real or perceived, has been a powerful justification before both domestic and international audiences for Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen. Given the huge

12 Hokayem and Roberts, "The War in Yemen," 166.

13 Najmeh Bozorgmehr and Simeon Kerr, "Iran Calls for Yemen Truce in Attempt to Damp Tension with Saudis: Gulf Rivalry," *Financial Times*, February 16, 2017: 5.

14 Ibid.

15 Yusuf al-Fishi posting on Facebook, reported in "Houthi Official Tells Iran to Stay Out of Yemen Crisis - Posting," Reuters, March 9, 2016, <http://news.trust.org/item/20160309152401-f1fp2>.

16 International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, 11.

17 Cable O9SANAA2279\_a from US Embassy in Sana'a, WikiLeaks, December 28, 2009, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/O9SANAA2279\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/O9SANAA2279_a.html).

18 Wael Abdul-Shafi, Kawa Hassan, and Adnan Tabatabai, "Victimized by Geopolitics: Iranian and Saudi Perspectives on the Refugee Crisis," CARPO, October 24, 2016, [hhttp://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/05\\_Carpo\\_Brief\\_Victimized-by-Geopolitics1.pdf](http://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/05_Carpo_Brief_Victimized-by-Geopolitics1.pdf), 4.

19 Ibid., 6. Hizballah is an alternate spelling of Hezbollah.

humanitarian toll of that intervention and the money and time that have been invested in a war that is now in its third year, even if Iran's influence on the Houthis is discovered to have been overstated,<sup>20</sup> it would make little sense for Saudi Arabia to acknowledge this now.

### What Is Iran Actually Doing?

Several analysts have listed the potential ways in which Iran may be conducting hybrid war in Yemen.<sup>21</sup> Yet the sources of the information cited rarely provide incontrovertible evidence for the allegations made, as is often the case with hybrid war.

With a few exceptions, *after* Saudi Arabia entered the Yemen war, Iran's rhetoric appears to have lost some of its imperialist overtones and instead focused more on its peaceful ambitions for Yemen. In April 2015, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein-Amir Abdollahian categorically denied that Iran was providing arms to the Houthis. He stated that "Iran backs a political path and stresses the importance of dialogue. . . . Iran's policy is to help promote peace, security and stability in Yemen and the whole region."<sup>22</sup> Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, likewise insisted that "Iran is not seeking to dominate Yemen" and called for a ceasefire, humanitarian assistance, dialogue, and a broad-based government.<sup>23</sup> Even more defiantly, in April 2017, Iran's defense minister, Brig. Gen. Hosein Dehqan, responded to US claims that the Houthis are using Iranian missiles by telling US officials that "the cowboy era is over, [as is the time for] hurling accusations, fabricating files [and] interfering."<sup>24</sup> Aside from framing the coalition as the aggressor, part of the rationale for this shift in focus may be that, in the current all-out war that will be difficult for either side to win cleanly, it makes sense for Iran to avoid being (or avoid being seen as) overtly

involved. This accords with analysis of Iran's broader regional strategy.<sup>25</sup>

Irrespective of the Iranian government's formal policy, it is of course still possible that Iran's Quds Force—or a hardline element within it—is pursuing its own military activities in Yemen as part of a general agenda of regional influence and disruption. The view of Iran's aims being about disruption, not necessarily religion, would also explain why Iran may have explored forging links with Yemen's southern secessionist movement,<sup>26</sup> which is secular, but nevertheless technically Sunni. Encouraging the Southern Movement would bring instability, at least in the short term; and if successful in the long term, then the separation between North and South Yemen would mean the creation of a separate Shia-dominated state directly on the Saudi border. But Iran's role here should not be overstated. For most southerners, Iran is an object of suspicion if not outright hate. Therefore, accepting Iranian aid would likely be no more than a pragmatic choice by individual leaders. The leader of one southern faction, Ali Salim al-Bid, hinted at this when he stated "If I have received money from Iran, I was [doing so] to help our people."<sup>27</sup> His comment is generally associated with suspected Iranian funding for his pro-southern independence TV channel, Aden Live, which operates out of Beirut.<sup>28</sup>

In stark contrast with the more peace-oriented rhetoric coming out of Iran *after* the start of the war in March 2015, the evidence suggests that Iran's links to the Houthis may actually have increased. Iran can be linked to limited military assistance to the Houthis from 2011<sup>29</sup> and potentially to more sophisticated military assistance from late 2014.<sup>30</sup> However, it is important not to exaggerate Iran's military reach in Yemen and to note that it is by no means clear that any such activity is being led by the Iranian government.

20 Hokayem and Roberts, "The War in Yemen," 158.

21 A useful potential list has been compiled by Maher Farrukh, Tyler Nocita, and Emily Estelle, "Warning Update: Iran's Hybrid Warfare in Yemen," Critical Threats Project, March 26, 2017, [https://www.criticalthreats.org/print/ana\\_58d7dd6967adb](https://www.criticalthreats.org/print/ana_58d7dd6967adb).

22 Ali Hashem, "Iran Official Warns against Further Strikes in Yemen," al-Monitor online, April 23, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/iran-foreign-minister-predicts-yemen-cease-fire.html>.

23 David Román, "Iran Says It Doesn't Want to Dominate Yemen; Tehran Urges Truce," *Wall Street Journal* online, April 14, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-foreign-minister-javad-zarif-puts-forward-peace-plan-for-yemen-1429006525>.

24 "Wazir al-difa' al-irani: 'ala wazir al-difa' al-amriki an ya'lima anna 'ahd al-cowboy qad walla,'" al-Masirah online, April 19, 2017, [http://www.almasirah.net/details.php?es\\_id=6755&cat\\_id=4](http://www.almasirah.net/details.php?es_id=6755&cat_id=4).

25 Walter Posch, "Ideologie und Strategie im Nahen Osten am Beispiel der Islamischen Republik Iran" in Walter Peischel (ed.), *Wiener Strategie Konferenz 2016: Strategie neu denken* (Berlin, 2017), [https://www.academia.edu/31004634/Iran\\_Ideologie\\_Strategie](https://www.academia.edu/31004634/Iran_Ideologie_Strategie), 270-293: 281.

26 Cable O9SANAA1662\_a, WikiLeaks.

27 W. Andrew Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen," Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 24, 2014, 429-40: 438.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 430.

30 Juneau, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen," 657.

## Is Iran Arming and Training the Houthis?

During 2015-16, there were four confirmed seizures of weapons in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden by the US, French, and Australian navies.<sup>31</sup> Numerous media headlines reported that the weapons captured were sent by Iran to Yemen as though this were hard fact. Yet it should be noted that much of the evidence is circumstantial. Out of all the above seizures, the UN Panel of Experts could link only 2,064 mainly light weapons directly to Iranian manufacture or origin,<sup>32</sup> even after taking into account the data (such as serial numbers) collected by Conflict Armament Research (CAR), which concluded that “a significant proportion” of the seized weapons were manufactured in Iran.<sup>33</sup> Even if all the consignments came from Iran, the fact that they consisted mainly of light and medium weapons means they would not give the Houthis any significant advantage. Yemen is already awash with such weapons, which are readily available on the black market at prices that have remained steady since shortly after the war started—probably due to the distribution of the Yemeni government stockpile.<sup>34</sup> Other countries in the region, particularly Somalia, are short of weapons. It is therefore possible that the weapons were destined for Somalia, as the UN Panel suggests.<sup>35</sup>

Yet there is some evidence that more sophisticated weaponry is appearing in Yemen and there are claims that some of the weapons now being used were not in Yemen's prewar stockpile.<sup>36</sup> These include drones that have been used to target the missile defense systems of the Saudi-led coalition in “kamikaze” attacks and that CAR concludes were “most likely” received from Iran, rather than manufactured by the Houthis themselves.<sup>37</sup> The Houthis also began a strategic land

missile campaign against Saudi Arabia in June 2015. Sources close to the Houthis claim that the so-called Qahir 1 missile, a Scud variant, was a Russian Sam 2 from Yemen's prewar stockpile and was modified inside Yemen to become a surface-to-air missile.<sup>38</sup> One independent expert concludes that “Modifying older Scud-style missiles for longer range is possible” based on information supplied by an Iraqi Scud missile engineer.<sup>39</sup> The UN Panel, however, considers Houthi claims to have manufactured new missile types locally “highly unlikely.”<sup>40</sup>

The US Navy also said it was “likely” that Iran has supplied the technology required for the Houthis to have allegedly launched a remote-controlled “drone” boat laden with explosives that rammed a Saudi frigate in January 2017.<sup>41</sup> Iran has also been implicated in helping the Houthis with a naval mining project in the Red Sea.<sup>42</sup> Most worrying for the United States, however, were the missile attacks against the USS *Mason* off the coast of Yemen in October 2016. Analysts have blamed Iran or its proxy Lebanese Hezbollah for supplying the missiles or at least providing the necessary expertise to launch them,<sup>43</sup> but this has not been proven.<sup>44</sup>

The evidence against Iran is strongly suggestive rather than categorical. The UN Panel of Experts on Yemen concluded in January 2017 that it had “not seen sufficient

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conclusion that the drones (Qasef-1 UAVs) were from Iran. The first is that the serial numbers and design are very similar to the Iranian Ababil family of UAVs. The second is that a shipment of six was intercepted in Ma'rib and “allegedly entered the country overland from Oman.” This second argument should be discounted since it is based on an assumption unrelated to CAR's expertise.

31 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, January 31, 2017, [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2017\\_81.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2017_81.pdf), 27.

32 Ibid., 28.

33 Conflict Armament Research, “Maritime Interdictions of Weapon Supplies to Somalia and Yemen,” November 2016, 18.

34 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, 31, 35.

35 Ibid., 31.

36 Jonathan Saul, Parisa Hafezi, and Michael Georgy, “Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War,” Reuters, March 22, 2017, [http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis-idUSKBN16S22R?utm\\_source=Boomtrain&utm\\_medium=manual&utm\\_campaign=20170322](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis-idUSKBN16S22R?utm_source=Boomtrain&utm_medium=manual&utm_campaign=20170322).

37 Conflict Armament Research, *Iranian Technology Transfers to Yemen*, March 2017, 2. Note that CAR provides two arguments for its

38 “Qahir 1 Rocket Launched against Saudi Khalid Air Base in Khamis Mushait,” Saba News online, December 13, 2015, <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news412586.htm>.

39 Tom Cooper, “How Did the Houthis Manage to Lob a Ballistic Missile at Mecca?” War Is Boring blog, January 2, 2017, <http://warisboring.com/how-did-the-houthis-manage-to-lob-a-ballistic-missile-at-mecca/#.Iiqlimloq>.

40 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, 35.

41 Saul, Hafezi, and Georgy, “Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War.”

42 “al-Sahm al-bahri”, izalat algham iraniyya zara'a-ha al-huthiyyun,” Al Arabiya online, April 16, 2017, <http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/ar-ab-and-world/yemen/2017/04/16/>.

43 US Navy, “US Military Strikes Radar Sites in Yemen Involved in Recent Missile Launches Threatening USS *Mason*,” Department of Defense, October 12, 2016, [http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story\\_id=97143](http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=97143).

44 US Department of State, “Special Briefing,” Senior Administration Officials on Yemen, October 14, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/10/263158.htm>.



A cache of weapons is assembled on the deck of the guided-missile destroyer USS Gravely. The weapons were seized from a stateless dhow that was intercepted by the coastal patrol ship USS Sirocco on March 28, 2016.  
*Photo credit: US Navy.*

evidence to confirm any direct large-scale supply of arms from the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>45</sup> They may have come from Russia,<sup>46</sup> from the black or grey arms markets,<sup>47</sup> or from entities inside Iran acting independently of the Iranian government.

45 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, 26.

46 It could be logical for Russia to supply weapons directly to Yemen, given Russia is assessed to have sold weapons to Iran “with the aim of constraining US freedom of maneuver in strategically important waterways” (Andrew Exum, former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy, “Testimony before the Foreign Affairs Committee,” February 16, 2017, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20170216/105594/HHRG-115-FA00-Wstate-ExumA-20170216.pdf>). There are also reports of Russian military advisers in Yemen prior to the war (Mohammed Ghobari, “Gunmen Kill Two Russian Military Instructors in Yemen,” Reuters, November 26, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-russia-killings-idUSBRE9AP06S20131126>). And today, Saleh is rumored to have at least one Russian military adviser. Note also that the Russian Ministry of Defense launched an Arabic version of its website in early 2017, implying an ambition to become more involved in the Middle East.

47 Yemen’s black and grey arms markets have in the past received shipments from many countries, including those in Eastern Europe and North Korea.

If new weapons are entering Yemen, how is this happening, given the Saudi naval blockade? The UN Panel of Experts concluded that the only credible supply routes are now by coastal dhow.<sup>48</sup> There has been a general belief that Oman facilitates the delivery of weapons from Iran over its border into Yemen.<sup>49</sup> Oman has vehemently denied this. While it is possible that this may have occurred early in the war, this author has witnessed a significant increase in security at the Yemen-Oman border in her own crossings over the past eighteen months, on the Omani side at least. Moreover, tribesmen manning checkpoints in Yemen’s northeastern deserts told this author that

48 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, 27.

49 Yara Bayoumy and Phil Stewart, “Iran Steps Up Weapons Supply to Yemen’s Houthis via Oman – Officials,” Reuters, October 20, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12KOCX>; Ashraf al-Falahi, “Just How Neutral Is Oman in Yemen War?” al-Monitor, October 12, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/10/oman-neutral-saudi-war-iran-houthis.html>.



the contraband cargoes are often driven up from the eastern Yemeni coast and hidden in the trucks after they have already crossed the border from Oman, ready for their onward journey across Yemen along the northern desert smuggling route. Locals report that larger vessels decant cargoes into small fishing boats that can then land on local beaches.<sup>50</sup> The local belief that the weapons are sent by Iran and destined for the Houthis is reflected in Yemen press reports<sup>51</sup> but the claims are not substantiated. The real question is this: Can heavy weapons be smuggled in via this route?<sup>52</sup> The UN Panel concluded that “the probability of large-scale shipments being able to successively use this route without detection is low.”<sup>53</sup> But this, of course, depends on how closely regional security forces and leaders are aligned with the smuggling networks. It is worth noting that President Hadi has little incentive to end the war, since his broad unpopularity inside Yemen means that he has little chance of a political future; meanwhile, many of those aligned with his government are profiting from the booming war economy.

It is also important not to lose sight of how a significant proportion of Houthi weaponry has, ironically, been supplied by the Yemeni military itself.<sup>54</sup> In this respect, the support of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been far more decisive to Houthi success than any support coming from Iran. It is estimated that around 60 percent of the Yemen military has remained loyal to

“... [T]he support of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been far more decisive to Houthi success than any support coming from Iran.”

Saleh,<sup>55</sup> including his highly trained Republican Guard. The UN Panel reports that the official Yemen military “potentially lost control of more than 68 percent of the national stockpile during the conflict.”<sup>56</sup> Some of this was destroyed in early coalition air strikes, but significant weapons likely remained. A White House briefing acknowledged that the Houthi radar sites used to fire missiles at the USS *Mason* “may have belonged at some other time to the Yemeni Government.”<sup>57</sup>

Even before the Saleh-Houthi alliance formed, US military correspondence suggests that the Hadi government may have been passing weapons directly and intentionally to the Houthis as late as October 2014, allegedly to fight al-Qaeda.<sup>58</sup> Extraordinarily, this was already after the Houthis had taken over Yemen’s capital and just five months before the Saudi-led coalition, supported by the US, began its war against them. This essentially means that some US-supplied weapons may have been handed to the Houthis via the legitimate government of Yemen. Some weapons systems from the Saudi arsenal may also have fallen into Houthi hands, possibly via battlefield capture from supplies given by Saudi Arabia to the official Yemen military.<sup>59</sup>

50 Locals in al-Mahra have long complained to this author about the burgeoning smuggling industry. Little has been done by regional authorities to tackle this problem. Indeed, in al-Mahra, the governor appointed by Hadi in November 2015 belongs to the same tribe that operates the major smuggling networks. This does not necessarily present a contradiction when one considers that Hadi’s lack of a political future in a post-war Yemen means that he has little incentive to end the war.

51 “Tafasil hawla dabt qabaliyyin bi-l-mahra li-shahnat asliha huthiyya muharraba,” *Aden Time*, April 16, 2017, <http://aden-time.net/NDetails.aspx?contid=24797>.

52 It is worth noting that the Islamic State in Yemen claimed in April 2017 to have received new heavy weapons consignments for its suicide bomber training camp in al-Bayda’. (See “Mu’askar al-Shaykh Abi Muhammad al-Firqan,” *al-Naba’* 76, April 13, 2017, 15). This suggests either that heavy weapons can be smuggled into Yemen despite the blockade, or that the ISY has somehow obtained heavy weapons from Yemen’s existing stockpile. There are many inside Yemen who believe that Saleh has been nurturing ISY to help sow chaos. To date, ISY has focused more on killing United Arab Emirates-supported military forces than Houthis.

53 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, 32.

54 Florence Gaub, “Whatever Happened to Yemen’s Army?” European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief Issue 9, April 2015, <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/whatever-happened-to-yemens-army/>, 4.

55 Tom Cooper, “How Did the Houthis Manage to Lob a Ballistic Missile at Mecca?” War Is Boring blog, January 2, 2017, <http://warisboring.com/how-did-the-houthis-manage-to-lob-a-ballistic-missile-at-mecca/#.liqlimloq>.

56 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, 34.

57 US Department of State, “Special Briefing.”

58 US CentCom email correspondence, WikiLeaks, October 28, 2017, <https://wikileaks.org/yemen-files/email/93/>.

59 The Armament Research Services report investigates the specific case of C90-CR series rocket launchers and Alhambra series hand grenades but acknowledges that they “likely represent only a fraction” of the real picture. Yago Rodriguez Rodriguez and N. R. Jenzen-Jones, *Spanish C90-CR Rocket Launchers & Alhambra Hand Grenades in Yemen*, Armament Research Services (ARES), Research Report no. 6, August 2016, <http://armamentresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ARES-Research-Report-No.-6-Spanish-C90-CR-Series-Rocket-Launchers-Alhambra-hand-grenades-in-Yemen-web.pdf>, 7, 19.

There is also some evidence to suggest that Iran and its proxy Hezbollah may be providing military advisers to the Houthis,<sup>60</sup> possibly also including Afghans who fought in Syria with Iran's Quds Force.<sup>61</sup> In 2014, three suspected IRGC and two suspected Hezbollah members were arrested on charges of spying and militarily assisting the Houthis, although they were released a few months later;<sup>62</sup> and an Iranian officer was reportedly killed in an air strike near the Saudi border where Houthi missile units were operating.<sup>63</sup> Hezbollah has itself boasted of its involvement in Yemen, with obvious propaganda value: "We're in Syria, we're in Palestine, we're in Iraq and we're in Yemen."<sup>64</sup> Media and analysts have oft repeated the story that the Houthis' Ansar Allah website posted photos of its leaders meeting Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut in October 2015. In fact, the post was of a Houthi delegation (including two women) on a regional tour, which included Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and Oman, where they also met with a number of European diplomats.<sup>65</sup> It is also worth noting that the Ansar Allah website has not been updated since 2015.

Claims of advisers and trainers have also been bolstered by occasional statements by some Iranian officials. In December 2014, a senior Iranian official reportedly told Reuters that Iran's Quds Force had a "few hundred" military personnel in Yemen to train Houthi fighters.<sup>66</sup> He also said that roughly one hundred Houthis had traveled to Iran during 2014 for military training. These claims were not verified by Reuters,<sup>67</sup> but in May 2015, the Quds Force Deputy Commander Brig. Gen. Esmail Qa'ani stated, "The defenders of Yemen

have been trained under the banner of the Islamic Republic."<sup>68</sup> And in February 2017, a senior Iranian official reportedly said that Quds Force Commander Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani met with top IRGC officials to discuss increasing training, arms, and financial support to the Houthis.<sup>69</sup> Several media reports appear to corroborate such claims, but their evidence is often based on statements made by official Saudi or Yemeni government sources, with the occasional provocative statement thrown in by Iran. This does not make the claims false—after all, Iran did use a similarly covert approach at first in Syria—but they must be treated with caution. Various confidential sources estimate that the number of such advisers could be anywhere between ten and one hundred. In other words, while the evidence suggests that Quds Force-backed military personnel are on the ground, the extent of their footprint is opaque and may not be as large as the various parties to the conflict claim.

## Conclusion

This paper attempts to steer a path through the many conflicting statements and reports about Iran's fingerprints in Yemen. Iranian involvement is beyond doubt. The difficulty lies in separating the rhetoric from the real activity. This is because the various warring parties, including Iran, merely stating that Iran is involved cannot be considered evidence, particularly when—as has been shown herein—it is in the interests of all sides to talk it up. Bellicose Iranian rhetoric, especially prior to March 2015 when the Saudi-led coalition began its air strikes in Yemen, might be seen as a cheap option for Iran. It has been able to watch Saudi Arabia become deeply entrenched in an expensive war that will be difficult to win outright, is damaging its international credibility, and distracts it from becoming more involved in countering Iran's interests in Syria.

There is certainly evidence of Iran supplying limited amounts of mainly small weapons and advisers to the Houthis. However, tangible evidence for Iranian military assistance in the form of heavy weapons that could decisively change the course of the war is scant. The alliance that the Houthis forged with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh has to date been far more pivotal to

60 Nicholas Blanford, "Hizbullah's Expanded Role in Syria Threatens Israel," *Jane's* by IHS Markit (no date found), [http://www.janes.com/images/assets/885/68885/Hizbullahs\\_expanded\\_role\\_in\\_Syria\\_threatens\\_Israel.pdf](http://www.janes.com/images/assets/885/68885/Hizbullahs_expanded_role_in_Syria_threatens_Israel.pdf), 9.

61 Saul, Hafezi, and Georgy, "Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War."

62 Mohammed Ghobari, "Yemen Frees Members of Iran Revolutionary Guards," *Reuters*, September 25, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-yemen-iran-idUKKCN0HK1K320140925>.

63 "Maqatal dabit irani fi al-hudud ma' al-sa'udiyya," *al-Anba'*, February 28, 2017, <http://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/arabic-international-news/725713/28-02-2017>.

64 Erika Solomon, "Lebanon's Hizbullah and Yemen's Houthis Open Up on Links," *Financial Times*, May 8, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/e1e6f750-f49b-11e4-9a58-00144feab7de>.

65 "Wafd al-lajna al-thawriyya al-'ulya yazuru tahrir dimna jawla iqlimiyya tashmulu al-'adid min buldan al-'alam," *Ansar Allah website*, 2015, <http://www.ansarallah.com/news/11272>.

66 Bayoumy and Ghobari, "Iranian Support Seen as Crucial for Yemen's Houthis."

67 Ibid.

68 "Sardar Qa'ani: dushmanan harif mubarizan yamani nistand," *Mashregh News online*, May 23, 2015, <http://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/419987/>.

69 Saul, Hafezi, and Georgy, "Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War."

“... [T]he longer the war continues, the more vulnerable the Houthis will become to Iranian influence—more from necessity than ideological alignment.”

Houthi successes than Iranian assistance. With or without Iran's involvement, the underlying structure of the conflict and Houthi grievances would likely be the same.

However, it is important not to be complacent about Iran's ambitions in Yemen. As shown, the Houthis have started to use increasingly sophisticated weaponry even though this cannot at present be directly linked to Iran. The start of the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen meant Iran could afford to shift its rhetorical emphasis to position itself as peace-seeking in contradistinction to a war-mongering Saudi Arabia. Despite the Iranian government's protestations, there are still indications that the Quds Force, or a hardline element within it, is pursuing a more aggressive strategy in Yemen. It is easy to see why it might be in Iran's interests to see a “Lebanization” of the conflict. If Yemen's political landscape becomes totally fractured, the Houthis could become the dominant militia, much like Hezbollah in Lebanon, leaning towards Iran and away from Saudi Arabia.<sup>70</sup> Such a fractious political landscape could present an ongoing distraction for Saudi Arabia for decades to come.

One final aspect of influence that is often missed amid the heavy focus on unraveling the provenance of Houthi military capability is the cultural aspect.<sup>71</sup> The Houthi TV channel al-Masirah, founded in 2012, is run from Beirut's Hezbollah-controlled southern suburbs. Al-Masirah bills itself as a Yemeni network that “seeks to spread awareness, proper values and justice among different

sectors of Arab and Islamic societies, based on Qur'anic culture and giving priority to the Palestinian issue.”<sup>72</sup> In reality, the programming is sectarian, heavily anti-Saudi Arabia and pro-Houthi. Its narratives of an oppressed people fighting corruption and marginalization reflect those propagated by Hezbollah. There is some evidence of a recent ratcheting up in Houthi cultural activity. Yemenis living in Sana'a told this author that the Houthis are now aggressively pushing their ideology using billboards and graffiti designed to enshrine their leader as religiously sanctioned by God. Moreover, in an April 2017 al-Qaeda film, a Houthi captive comments that he was engaged in non-military operations that were “cultural and religious” in nature.<sup>73</sup> While the al-Qaeda evidence is likely to be highly selective, even tribesmen in Yemen's remote east, far from the battlefronts and largely impervious to sectarian concerns, commented to this author that the television celebrations of the Prophet's birthday in Sana'a last August felt significantly more “Shia” to them.

In essence, the longer the war continues, the more vulnerable the Houthis will become to Iranian influence—more from necessity than ideological alignment, but the latter may follow in time. There may already be hardline elements inside the Houthi camp—Hezbollah and Iran's Quds Force (or indeed some other Iranian entity) are collaborating more closely than their respective leaderships either acknowledge or desire. This in turn will exacerbate the sectarian nature of the war, a development that can only fuel the appeal and recruitment prospects of militant jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Yemen. Both will use the war and its aftermath as an opportunity to pin the local Houthi enemy onto the global jihadist agenda of an existential battle against Shia “rejectionists” and other perceived infidels. Thus, a conflict that began essentially as a politically and tribally motivated dispute over territory, resources, and power may yet over time turn into a long-term cycle of bloody sectarian violence. In this respect, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen is—to some extent—helping to exacerbate the very problem it claimed to be designed to solve.

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70 Laurent Amelot, “Yemen: une guerre saoudienne contre l'Iran,” *Outre-Terre*, March 2015, 329-38: 331.

71 An International Crisis Group report from 2009 does look at Yemeni officials' complaints during the Houthi wars from 2004 to 2010 that the Houthi leadership, backed by Iran, was seeking to restore the Zaydi imamate and proselytize to bring the population closer to Iran's “Twelver” Shi'ism. Such complaints were largely dismissed as overblown at the time. See International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, 3, 9 (ft. 50), and 10.

72 Footer on each page of al-Masirah website, <http://www.almasirah.net/>.

73 “Munashadat al-asra al-huthiyyin lada mujahidi ansar al-shari'a, 2,” Ansar al-Shari'a (Yemen), Correspondents' Network, April 2017.



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