

BEYOND THE ISRAELI ATTACKS: STRUCTURAL OBSTACLES TO DEFEATING THE HOUTHIS



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Introduction

The Houthis' announcement of the death of their Chief of Staff¹, Mohammed al-Ghamari, last October was the most significant Israeli intelligence breach since the beginning of its campaign against the Houthis. This announcement came shortly after the killing² of nearly half the cabinet members, a development that shocked not only the Houthis but all observers.

Israel boasted about these operations, declaring them just the beginning³. The fact that the victims included both political and military figures fueled speculation that the Houthis' fate would resemble that of Hezbollah.

Despite the importance of the strike and the qualitative intelligence breakthrough achieved by Israel against the Houthis for the first time, many Houthi experts, such as Ali al-Bukhaiti⁴ and Adnan al-Jabrani⁵, assert that the targeted cabinet members were not considered senior leaders within the group. The assassination of al-Ghamari, however, represents the most significant blow from a media perspective. While al-Jabrani believes⁶ the void left by al-Ghamari's death can be filled, the former Chief of Staff was a highly trained figure. This makes the targeting deeply troubling for the movement, as it has eroded the confidence of its popular base.

The Military Aspect: Why Is It Difficult to Eliminate the Houthis Militarily?

The most significant challenge for the US and Israel is that the Houthis are a new enemy, and this poses a challenge in gathering intelligence. Their information, particularly on key military figures, remains limited⁷. In comparison with the bombardment of the Houthis and Hezbollah, we see a significant difference in the results of these raids. Despite targeting more than a thousand⁸ Houthi targets, no first-rank Houthi military leaders have been reported killed. All those killed by Israel were civilian ministers. This indicates a greater Houthi ability to conceal themselves.

The failure to target Houthi military leaders stems from a lack of understanding of the Houthis. Despite their control of power in Sana'a for nearly ten years, the Houthi movement governs the areas under its control with the logic of a secret movement, not a formal government.

In other words, the Houthis were able to maintain the confidentiality of their information, including that of their military leaders, weapons depots, and other sensitive details. This means that the Houthis' control of power did not result in the exposure of their sensitive information. This is extremely important from an intelligence and security perspective.

The Houthis' strategy of concealing information from their leaders is highly complex. They place figureheads in charge, while other, shadowy figures make decisions⁹. Houthi decision-making is primarily conducted by a council known as the Jihad Council¹⁰. The Jihad Council consists¹¹ of approximately nine members who represent the Houthi leadership. These members develop strategic plans for expansion and control and determine priorities for other paths. All are veterans of the group's military field operations, dating back to the six wars against the former government(s) of President Ali Abdullah Salih. The Jihad Council consists of Abdul-Malik al-Houthi himself, the director of the group's leader's office (the General Council), and the head of the Executive Council, who are members of the "Jihad Council," along with military personnel, including a senior Iranian officer and a senior Hezbollah officer¹².

In addition to the Jihad Council, which is the most important, the General Council, and the Executive Council, there are other councils¹³, such as the Provincial Affairs Council, the Political Council, the Government Action Authority, and the Judicial Council. Each of these councils branches off into several other committees dealing with sub-issues related to the Houthis' management of the areas under their control.

The primary challenge in tracking down Houthi leaders is that the movement relies heavily on loyalty to its ideology. Consequently, many of the movement's most influential leaders hail from Saada, the Houthis' primary stronghold. Many of these individuals also have religious (Zaidi) or lineage (Hashemite) ties or are believers in the Houthi ideology based on divine selection. This makes the intelligence penetration of them a complex task.

Although the recent Israeli attacks did not target any individual considered part of the Supreme Jihad Council, these attacks raise questions about Israel's ability to penetrate Houthi security measures for key military figures.

Another issue is that many of these military leaders were involved in the six Saada Wars (2004-2010), battles the movement fought against the Yemeni government led by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In other words, if we want to identify the movement's primary leaders, we may need to revisit battles the movement fought 20 years ago. This further complicates access to reliable information.

Another issue is that the Houthis are constantly changing leaders and their positions and creating new bodies with new names. This has two goals: the first is to prevent any leader from monopolizing power in their own hands, so that they do not pose any future threat to

the nature of decision-making within the movement. The second is to spread misinformation about official positions within the movement, especially since many of these appointments are not officially announced, nor are any official decisions made about them.

The Houthi shadow government's control over important decisions extends beyond military decisions to include executive decisions. For example, although the Houthis appoint governors for the governorates under their control, the primary controllers of these governorates are the "supervisors"¹⁴ Supervisors are individuals directly subordinate to Houthi councils whose primary task is to administer the governorate and whose authority is higher than that of the governor. Each supervisor has several assistants, including a security assistant.

On the other hand, despite known Iranian support for the Houthis, as well as the support provided by Hezbollah, the Houthis have also been able to smuggle¹⁵ weapons from rebel and terrorist movements in Somalia. These smuggling routes are linked to some armed movements affiliated with al-Qaeda or ISIS, and this poses a growing challenge in drying up the Houthis' weapons sources. Weapons coming from Somalia are not primarily linked to Iran, which gives the Houthis greater room for maneuver, even if Iran faces severe crises that could prevent it from continuing to support the Houthis with weapons.

In addition, the Houthis are also active in smuggling weapons across the land borders from Oman and Yemen, as confirmed by a United Nations Security Council report¹⁶. Earlier in July, Yemeni government forces seized¹⁷ 750 tons of Iranian weapons destined for the Houthis. The shipment included highly advanced weapons and missiles.

In addition to the unknown military council, which is challenging to target, and the various methods of smuggling weapons that make it difficult to dry up their sources, another strength distinguishes the Houthis from a military standpoint: their ability to recruit. The years of the Yemeni war have proven that the Houthis are always able to recruit many soldiers into their army.

The Houthis' ability to recruit and mobilize forces lies in their relationships with Yemeni tribes, many of whom they have managed to neutralize or win over to their side. This is particularly true of the tribes surrounding Sana'a, which are considered primarily responsible for protecting the capital. Perhaps the most striking evidence of the Houthis' ability to win over the tribes surrounding Sana'a is their refusal¹⁸ to intervene to protect former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh prior to his assassination in December 2017 due to a dispute with the Houthis. Saleh had been the most powerful figure in Yemen for decades and maintained strong ties with the tribes.

The final point regarding the military aspect is that a military operation to eliminate the Houthis requires a military force on the ground, and it does not appear that the USA or Israel will be able to engage in a protracted ground war. As for the forces of the internationally recognized government, they do not appear to have the necessary readiness to return to a major war for two reasons: First, the main supporters of these forces, represented by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are unwilling to return to war¹⁹. Second, there is a lack of clarity and inconsistency in the plans of the armed forces of the internationally recognized government.

The Political Aspect: Between the Specter of Partition and the Conflict of Projects

The testimony of Yemeni Shura Council member Salah Batis, presented in a podcast episode broadcast earlier in July, revisits the moment Sana'a fell to the Houthis²⁰. In his testimony, Batis said that the Yemeni Minister of Defense at the time refused to issue a decision to mobilize the military to confront the Houthis, arguing that this would serve the interests of his political opponents, represented by the Islah Party (the Muslim Brotherhood's Yemeni branch).

In other words, the Yemeni Minister of Defense chose his own narrow political interests over the greater good of the nation. Although Salah Batis had offered him tribal fighters ready to fight, they could only act within an official government decision declaring a general mobilization of all components of the population.

This testimony confirms that there are various conflicting projects within the internationally recognized government, which is the Houthis' primary opponent today. Perhaps the political division within the internationally recognized government began clearly with the announcement of the Southern Transitional Council in 2017²¹, as the council focuses primarily on restoring the southern state within the borders that existed before Yemeni unification in 1990.

This political division has also resulted in a large number of military forces, such as the National Resistance on the West Coast, forces affiliated with the Transitional Council, such as the Security Belt in Aden, Abyan, Lahj, and Shabwa, and the Elite Forces on the Hadhramaut Coast. New forces have also been formed in the Hadhramaut Plateau²², affiliated with the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance, and recruitment camps in Mahra²³, affiliated with tribal sheikh Ali al-Harizi, who is linked to Oman.

These various projects and political figures with differing priorities have paralyzed the legitimacy in carrying out its core functions. The Presidential Leadership Council, announced in April 2022, was a solution to this problem, with a president and eight deputies. However, this decision has had no positive impact on political decision-making or the economic situation.

The legitimate government's failure to provide a genuine political model and its inability to improve economic conditions prevent popular support in Houthi-controlled areas from launching a comprehensive popular revolution against Houthi rule. This makes overthrowing the Houthis increasingly difficult. Any armed conflict against the Houthis without a popular revolution, particularly from the tribes, which represent a significant human resource for the Houthis, would be highly costly.

At the same time, the Houthis have been able to create a powerful aura around Abdulmalik Houthi's personality, thanks to the mystique surrounding his character and his religious standing as a spiritual leader before being a political one. This gives him a unique sense of privacy and the ability to resolve problems. It's also noticeable that whenever any issue arises, particularly one related to grievances, a delegation from the so-called "Office of the Master"²⁴ is always dispatched to resolve the matter.

In other words, the Houthis have attempted to portray Abdulmalik Houthi, the movement's leader, as a religious leader fighting the Zionist-American aggression and sparing no effort to support Muslims in Gaza. This leader completely rejects injustice and seeks to resolve grievances, regardless of their nature, according to Houthis. The presence of a charismatic religious figure with strong oratory skills, fighting an opponent hated by the entire population, Israel, alongside a fragmented political opponent, namely the legitimate government, makes it politically difficult to eliminate the Houthis.

Perhaps it is useful to recall Ibn Khaldun's classical theory of 'Asabiyyah in political sociology, which explains the cycle of state formation and development. This theory suggests that the founding phase is often based on strong tribal cohesion and solid leadership. However, with time and stability, this tribalism may begin to weaken, and manifestations of luxury and leniency may increase. This weakens the governance style, and factors of division and disintegration emerge.

Applying this idea to the reality of the Houthis, it can be observed that the social cohesion on which the movement was founded remains strong and effective, and that Abdulmalik al-Houthi remains, for a large segment of the popular base, an unquestionable leader.

Furthermore, the Houthis have not suffered a major military defeat that would have eroded their image and prestige among their supporters.

The Houthi leaders' ambitions for power and wealth remain unfulfilled. Since the group seized power, Yemen has been suffering from a stifling blockade and challenging economic conditions. Therefore, relinquishing power under any circumstances would be tantamount to losing a precious treasure they have dreamed of for years, prompting fierce resistance to any attempt to oust them militarily or politically.

The Social Aspect and Concluding Remarks

The Houthi presence remains unacceptable to a broad segment of the popular base in Houthi-controlled areas. In other words, a significant segment of the population has accepted the Houthis as a coercive force, rather than a chosen authority. The most striking evidence of this is what happened in December 2017, when former President Ali Abdullah Saleh incited people to revolt against the Houthis. This resulted in a popular political earthquake.

However, today the Houthis have been able to leverage their intervention in the Gaza war to portray themselves as defenders of justice against Israel. These Houthi attacks have played a significant role in whitewashing their history, particularly given their failure to resolve economic problems, such as providing sustained salaries to employees.

The importance of Palestine to a large segment of those living in Houthi-controlled areas may make them hesitant to engage in any military campaign whose outcomes would directly benefit Israel or the United States. Such views, which see the Houthis as part of the Yemeni fabric, with whom a solution can be reached without fighting under USA or Israeli banners, should not be underestimated.

In conclusion, despite the importance of all the aspects outlined in this brief, this does not mean that the Houthis' continued existence is inevitable, or that their elimination is impossible. Instead, this brief indicates that the military, political, and social conditions are still not ripe for such a military operation to uproot the Houthis. This makes repeating the experience against Hezbollah difficult to achieve at present.

All of these circumstances and facts are subject to change at any time. Despite the significance of the recent Israeli strike against the Houthis and the shock and confusion it caused among the Houthis, it does not appear to be sufficient to penetrate the Houthis' security and military capabilities. The same applies to all other aspects, which can change rapidly. However, despite the significant power gap between the Houthis and their adversary, Israel/US, it does not appear they will be eliminated in the near future.

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