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By: Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen

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Cover photo: A rally in Aleppo on December 13, 2024, celebrating the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria // Photo credit: Medyan Darienh / Alamy.



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

The rapid and unexpected advance of opposition forces in Syria in late 2024, culminating in the **overthrow of the Assad regime**, has raised hopes in the anti-Houthi camp that a similar scenario could unfold in Yemen and deal another significant blow to the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. Yemenis see several parallels between their situation and that of Syria. Both the Houthis and the Assad regime were primary belligerents in a devastating civil war. Both were major allies of Iran and other Iranian-backed regional actors, such as Hezbollah. From their respective capitals, Sana'a and Damascus, both adopted a strategy that relied on specific social groups to govern and fight while excluding or marginalizing other social and political factions.

However, despite these apparent similarities, the contexts of the two countries are fundamentally different, and it is unlikely that Yemen will witness a surprise collapse like the one in Syria. The Assad family maintained power for over five decades, long enough for the regime to stagnate and become an aging authority devoid of a strong ideological foundation. Bashar al-Assad inherited power from his father, Hafez, in 2000 without having to exert any significant effort to seize or defend it. When the country broke out into civil war, Assad was forced to rely on external actors such as Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia to maintain his position.

By contrast, the Houthis represent a first-generation movement with a strong ideological foundation. Although relatively young, they compensate for their lack of experience with passion and determination to protect the power they have recently acquired. The Houthis have thousands of devoted followers who are prepared to fight to the end.

Yemen's geographical divisions and the historical legacy of the Zaidi Imamate in northern Yemen play a critical role in shaping the limitations of any military action against the Houthis. They maintain tight control over the rugged terrain between Sa'ada and Sana'a, which serves as a natural fortress. Even though they lack widespread popularity, including among many Zaidis, the Houthis represent one of the country's distinct regional identities, and defeating them in their northern heartland would represent a significant challenge.

The anti-Houthi camp in Yemen also differs significantly from the opposition forces that seized power in Damascus. While there were divisions within the Syrian opposition, these were largely confined to the Kurdish component in the

northeast of the country in recent years. In Yemen, multiple regional players with conflicting agendas are involved, chief among them Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and to a lesser degree, Oman and Qatar. The struggle for influence and control in Yemen is thus far more complex than in Syria, and has become a new battleground for regional rivalries.

Additionally, the Houthis pose a real threat to both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as demonstrated in its past targeting of infrastructure in both countries. Therefore, any move to escalate the conflict in Yemen against the Houthis would carry significant risks of renewed missile and drone attacks, which would likely be seen as unacceptable in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

Another Houthi strength has been their centralized decision-making, which has enabled them to manage internal conflicts without escalating and threatening the cohesion of the overall group. The nexus for this decision-making is Abdelmalek al-Houthi, who holds absolute political and spiritual authority. While the group has expanded its dominance over the past decade to new areas of Yemen, the Houthi inner circle has not grown proportionately and still relies on a small circle of loyalists from the Sa'ada wars (2004–2010). This centralization may now represent a critical vulnerability if targeted action is taken against the group's leadership, particularly Abdelmalek. For example, when former Supreme Political Council head Saleh al-Sammad was killed in a Saudi-led coalition strike in 2018, Mahdi al-Mashat was appointed as his successor. However, Al-Mashat has generally failed to fill the void left by Al-Sammad, particularly in maintaining tribal alliances and carrying out key organizational duties.

Yemen is very sensitive to regional developments and is easily influenced by them. The Houthis' involvement in the regional conflict that followed October 7 and the outbreak of war in Gaza have positioned Yemen at the heart of these significant regional transformations. It is currently unclear whether Houthi attacks against Red Sea shipping and Israel will continue after a cease-fire was agreed in Gaza. Yemen is also not necessarily a top priority for regional actors, so this could lead to efforts to freeze the conflict.

While further changes will undoubtedly occur, they will ultimately be shaped by Yemen's unique context, so comparisons hold only limited value. One of the most significant concerns remains the weak and divided state of the anti-Houthi camp. Regional and international powers are unlikely to favor a potential power vacuum in Houthi-held territories or further fragmentation that could destabilize the region. As a result, any approach to addressing the Yemeni situation by escalating against the Houthis militarily will likely be seen as coming with heavy risks and costs but with limited potential for meaningful gains.

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