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# Entrenched Power: The Houthi System of Governance

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*Cover Photo:*

*People turn out for an annual pro-Houthi rally in Sana'a on June 3, 2022 //  
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## Introduction

One of the challenges to ending the war in Yemen is the changing nature of the Yemeni state under Houthi rule. The Zaidi Shia movement has created facts on the ground that considerably complicate the work of bringing the various parties together in a new political arrangement. The de facto Houthi authority has effectively transformed the institutions of government in Sana'a as part of a project to build its own state.

The group has deployed sectarian doctrine, built a large army and created an extensive network of supra-governmental supervisors, widening the gap between society and rulers. It is hard to imagine this vast political and economic network voluntarily dismantling to share power with other Yemeni factions.

Although the group calls itself Ansar Allah, meaning the Partisans of God, most Yemenis view it as a family enterprise based on the teachings of Badreddine al-Houthi (d. 2010) and other Zaidi religious scholars, that was built up by Al-Houthi's sons and seeks to revive the Zaidi imamate that was politically dominant in North Yemen for almost three centuries until 1962. This paper examines the Houthi movement's aims and origin as well as the structure of the Sana'a-based Yemeni state in its hands since 2014. It also seeks to inform discussions on issues and challenges that would be involved in attempting to incorporate elements of this structure into a post-settlement system of governance.

## Houthi Origins

The Houthi movement began life in the early 1980s in the Zaidi heartland of Sa'ada in northern Yemen with the dual aim of countering the [spread of Wahhabism](#) from Saudi Arabia and reviving Zaidi Imamah rule. The family was able to assert primacy through the [Zaidi theory of the imamate](#), which merges political and religious leadership in the figure of the state leader while extending the base of those who can take on this role to anyone from the socio-religious class of Hashemites (descendants of the Prophet Mohammed).

The Houthi family [established an extensive network](#) in Sa'ada governorate and other northern tribal areas. Mohammed and Hamed Badreddine were active through youth associations and summer camps in local boarding schools that came to be called the Believing Youth, while Hussein and Yahya Badreddine were active in politics, and Abdelmalek Badreddine was involved in military activities. Sheikh Badreddine chose Abdelmalek to lead the movement after his eldest son, Hussein al-Houthi, was killed in 2004 during the first of six bouts of fighting with the Sana'a government of then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh, known as the Sa'ada Wars, which lasted until 2010.

The Houthi theory of government mixes traditional Zaidism with a style of family rule similar to that of Gulf monarchies and elements of the Iranian revolutionary system, while technically retaining the republican structure of the Yemeni state. While the movement celebrates its 2014 seizure of Sana'a each year on September 21 as a victory against corruption and foreign intervention, it formally canceled the September 26 republican revolution day. Still, many Yemenis use the latter occasion – lighting up the roofs of their houses and playing songs of the 1962 revolution – as a means of expressing disapproval of

Houthi subversion of the republican system.

While some opponents accuse the Houthi movement of trying to revive the Zaidi imamate, others point to family monopolization of power as a violation of the principles of the imamate. Historically, it was not uncommon for Zaidi rulers to consolidate power through their immediate family and transfer rule to their sons, though this risked rejection and coups. In his latter years in power, the late President Saleh also relied on family members to shore up power, but the Houthi format has taken the phenomenon to another level, possibly sowing the seeds of future dissent.

## Keeping It in the Family

The Houthi **governing structure** is led from the top by Abdelmalek al-Houthi, who has absolute authority as a Hashemite Zaidi leader considered to possess charismatic power as a descendent of the Prophet. The influence and authority of any Houthi figure is defined not by his title or role but his proximity to Abdelmalek, who lives in a secret location and is described in Houthi media as “leader of the revolution” (qa’id al-thawra).

Although Abdelmalek al-Houthi occupies this unchallenged position as the movement’s leader, only a limited group of people have access to him. He sits at the **center of two networks**. The first is composed of those who were loyal to the Houthi family and Abdelmalek personally during the Sa’ada Wars. Abdelmalek refers to these people, who are mostly from Sa’ada governorate, as mujahideen (“fighters for God”). Many of them are Hashemites. The second comprises the extensive social networks established by the other sons of Badreddine in the 1990s.

Families with marital relationships with the Houthi family are important in forming the main supervisors, such as the Ijri, Mutawwakil, Mo’ayyed, Tawoos and Mashat families. Hashemite origin also connects the Houthis with dozens of families, most notably the Shami family. Regional ties are also valued, such that most of the primary supervisors are from Sa’ada governorate. Those who joined the group after it became dominant in Sana’a have come to be known as mutahawwitheen (“the Houthified”), playing more minor roles such as district supervisor within their own geographical locality.

These identities are important in managing internal disputes, in which Abdelmalek is the ultimate arbiter. The Houthi family, with its marriage connections, is at the top of the pyramid. Loyalists from Sa’ada governorate who fought with the Houthis in their early stages come second, and the Hashemites, in general, are third. If there is a conflict between a Hashemite from outside Sa’ada and a non-Hashemite from Sa’ada governorate, the latter will prevail. A Hashemite from Sa’ada has enormous leverage inside the group.

Abdelmalek’s younger brother, **Abdelkhaleq al-Houthi**, is the second in command, despite his young age (he is thought to have been born in the late 1980s). After the movement seized Sana’a in 2014, Abdelkhaleq was made leader of the largest Houthi military brigade, known as the Reserve Forces. Then in 2018, he became military leader of what the Houthi administration calls the Central Region, meaning Sana’a and its surroundings. **Yousef al-Madani**, husband of Hussein al-Houthi’s daughter, is another key military leader.

Abdelkarim al-Houthi, the uncle of Abdelmalek, holds two vital positions as both chairman of the executive office of the group and the interior minister. Yahya al-Houthi, an older brother to Abdelmalek, serves as education minister. Though he only acquired religious education and never attended public schools, education is a vital ideological tool for engendering loyalty to the movement. It is also the education ministry that controls much of the international food aid in the north. A new generation of the Houthi family is now taking on important positions – Hussein al-Houthi’s son Ali is a deputy interior minister for the Houthi authority.

Houthis outside this ruling circle who raise objections to this form of governance appear to have been silenced. Mohammed Abdelazim al-Houthi, a cousin of Badreddine, largely disappeared from public view in 2018 after he is believed to have indicated his opposition to Abdelmalek’s leadership, though he was shown this year in a photograph that accompanied a news report in Houthi-run media.

## Government by Supervisor

The Houthis established a supervisory system involving a network of loyal individuals as a parallel system to the official institutions of the state. Houthi supervisors have been dispersed throughout state institutions since the group seized control of Sana’a in September 2014, and it is these supervisors, not the official government office holders, who hold power in their various fields.

There is a general supervisor in every governorate, and below him primary supervisors in districts, villages and areas. According to their specialization, dozens or hundreds of supervisors work below every general supervisor. This first level of supervisors – the general supervisors – is directly chosen by Abdelmalek al-Houthi and operates under the authority of the revolutionary committee (al-lajna al-thawriyya), headed by Mohammed al-Houthi.

This parallel system first began in Sa’ada governorate when Houthi forces took it over in March 2011 during the popular uprising against Saleh. When they seized the capital in September 2014, they distributed their armed men along the city’s streets in the form of security committees. Other armed men bearing the title “supervisor” (mushrif) were then dispersed among the different ministries under the claim of fighting corruption.

One month after the resignation of President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and Prime Minister Khaled Bahah in January 2015, the Houthis issued a constitutional declaration forming revolutionary committees to organize the work of the supervisors. There was pressure from former president Saleh, who after leaving office in 2012 had formed an alliance with the Houthis, to shelve the committees. The Houthi government agreed to this in August 2016, but in practice, the Houthis continued to run their own system and stepped up their use of committees after assassinating Saleh in December 2017.

The Houthi holding real authority can be the first person in the ministry, such as Education Minister Yahya al-Houthi, or the second-in-command, such as Hussein al-Ezzi, a deputy to foreign minister Hisham Sharaf. Keeping people like Sharaf in place presents a technocratic façade for the real power – the supervisor who is a Houthi loyalist with little

or no experience in the specific field.

This can happen even if the front person was appointed by the Houthi administration. The current president in Sana'a is Mahdi al-Mashat, but behind him there is an office manager, Ahmed Hamed, whom Yemenis dub "president of the president". As a former member of the Houthi negotiating team following the group's seizure of Sana'a in 2014, Al-Mashat is effective as the face of the Houthi state as head of the Supreme Political Council, while Hamed is a tough figure better suited to working in the background.

In a few cases, the Houthis have established new institutions, such as the General Authority of Islamic Alms (zakat), which replaced the pre-war [General Administration of Islamic Alms](#) with a new staff and structure. They also created the [General Authority of Endowments](#) to replace the Ministry of Religious Endowment and Guidance. Both zakat and endowment revenue are handled by the office of Abdelmalek al-Houthi rather than any government ministry.

The movement has also created the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation (SCMCHA) to manage NGOs and humanitarian aid. These new institutions have been set up in fields where there are significant revenue streams available to the Houthi government.

## Supervisor Functions

Each governorate has a general supervisor, and below every general supervisor there are dozens or sometimes hundreds of minor supervisors, who are divided into five categories.

The first category is the security supervisor, who is responsible for sensing signs of opposition or even resentment against the Houthi authority. The names of these figures are kept out of the public sphere, where they are only referred to by patronyms such as Abu Hasan. Some disappear from public view altogether. For example, the death of senior security official [Taha al-Madani](#) in a coalition airstrike was announced in 2017, a year and a half after his disappearance. Sultan Zabin, the Criminal Investigation Department director, seemed to disappear after the UN [sanctioned](#) him for involvement in torture and sexual violence. Houthi media [announced his death](#) in April 2021.

The security supervisor also oversees the [three security agencies](#), all of which operate under the aegis of the Interior Ministry. First, Preventive Security is an intelligence apparatus tasked with monitoring Houthi fighters to prevent them from fleeing and punishing any Houthi official engaged in subversive activities. Second, the Security and Intelligence Bureau is the body that resulted from the merger of the two official intelligences. Third, the Zainabiyat is a special intelligence agency of women whose responsibilities include monitoring and arresting women and supervising women's prisons.

Next, financial supervisors are responsible for collecting taxes and Islamic zakat. The third kind of supervisor is the social supervisor who deals with diverse social actors such as tribal leaders and traditional neighborhood bosses known as *aqil*. The fourth and fifth kinds are the intellectual and educational supervisors, whose interrelated missions

concern disseminating Houthi propaganda. For example, the educational supervisor monitors schools, universities and other educational establishments, while the intellectual supervisor organizes various Houthi events, such as the commemoration of the 2004 death of Hussein al-Houthi. These supervisors receive their monthly salaries from the office of Abdelmalek al-Houthi but are also known to **collect levies from local communities** under their purview.

Houthi leaders have centralized power and sidelined traditional actors in Yemeni society through this supervisory system. Tribal sheikhs and aqils used to play important roles in serving their communities as figures who were chosen through processes within those communities. The Houthi centralization of power, a general feature of the modern state, runs counter to traditional patterns of governance in Yemen.

According to Adel Dashela, **a researcher on Yemeni tribes**, most of the northern tribal areas were left underdeveloped in the modern period and the presence of the state was minimal. Former President Saleh used a policy of divide and rule to buy the loyalty of tribal sheikhs, while empowering figures with weak social standing to weaken the genuine actors. The Houthi movement has applied the same strategy but on a larger scale, deploying various methods to cow recalcitrant sheikhs, including even **destroying their homes**.

As for the aqil, his traditional role was to mediate between residents and the government in resolving local issues. Under Houthi rule, his mission has been reframed as collecting information on residents and passing it on to the social supervisors under whom they operate. The aqil will provide the names of young men who can be called upon to fight. He will also **distribute humanitarian aid** to families, with **priority given to those who show loyalty** in raising funds from the community or helping with the recruitment of fighters. The aqil is also required to make sure young people attend cultural programs that **instill regime ideology**.

This highly centralized system reflects the Houthi notion of power as emanating from a figure who does not in theory need to build ties to diverse local communities since he is invested with divine authority. But this approach risks failing to address the variety of needs of different elements of Yemen's complex society and could end up provoking a counter-reaction if those outside the Houthi nexus of power feel deprived of food, medicine and various forms of social mobility. The ideology also risks clashing with family and tribal traditions and other pre-existing social bonds, particularly through its **use of violence**. This raises the possibility of a backlash against authoritarian rule, not least in a highly armed society such as Yemen.

## Houthi Economics

More than half of the Yemeni population live in Houthi-controlled areas that suffer from a lack of revenue-generating natural resources. Yet Houthi taxes collected in these regions, estimated to be **US\$1.8 billion** a year, are, according to a Yemeni economic expert, equal to the annual tax revenue during the last years of the Saleh regime. Saleh, of course, controlled the entire country as opposed to only one part of it.

The economic expert, who spoke on condition of anonymity, noted that the Houthis have

been highly focused on taxes as a key revenue source. Banks and big companies have been required to reveal their tax accounts since their first year of operation, often long before the Houthi movement took over, and then been obliged to make up for any taxes they did not pay during the Saleh years.

The Islamic zakat has become a mandatory tax rather than a voluntary religious duty. The Houthi government makes sure to collect the tax during the month of Ramadan since the fear of government reprisals during this most-profitable period of the year means business owners are loath to argue about payment. For this reason, zakat gathered in Ramadan has been a source of tension between the authorities and chambers of commerce.

The Houthi administration has in effect applied a new standard of tax efficiency at the same time as introducing a double-taxation system. The taxes extracted from the private sector in particular have helped make up for the partial salary cut for public servants after the central bank moved in 2016 to Aden under internationally recognized government control.

The Houthi government has also been inventive in collecting money for a roster of popular state-backed commemorations such as the Prophet's birthday, the launch of the coalition military campaign, Ashoura, which marks the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Hussein, Jerusalem Day as well as impromptu fundraising in support of political causes. As a whole, this system of levies works like a machine, functioning year-round and including everyone, from the rich and powerful to street vendors and small farmers.

At the same time, the Houthi government has often neglected or been late in paying salaries and maintaining public services. Usually, state employees have received only half their monthly wage at irregular intervals, a measure justified as a taxing-at-source for zakat. Services such as water, electricity and road maintenance sometimes go unattended. The main reason given by the Houthi government for delays and cuts in salaries and poor public services is the difficulty of fighting a war, including the economic blockade (see, for example, the speech made by Abdelmalek al-Houthi on June 17). However, Sana'a real estate prices have soared during the war, with most buyers being a class of pro-Houthi Yemenis who have apparently grown wealthy. Real estate is a good investment while the currency suffers amid economic deterioration; such transactions can also provide a way to launder money and transfer it out of the country.

These activities have been enabled by a culture of corruption and absence of accountability, especially for Houthi supervisors, due to snuffing out the space for political activity and open media that had existed, albeit imperfectly, during previous decades.

In short, the Houthi economy has contributed to rising poverty, creating a wealthy class of war profiteers and widening the gap between rich and poor – factors that played a part in stoking the popular uprising against Saleh's regime.

## Post-War Scenarios

Following the seizure of Sana'a, a Peace and National Partnership Agreement was signed in September 2014 to form a coalition government of the Houthis and other political

parties in return for the withdrawal of Houthi forces. But once the government was formed, the forces remained. Already in those first months, Bahah, the prime minister, complained that Houthi supervisors were interfering in ministerial work and behaving as a superior authority. With Houthi governance now entrenched over more than seven years of war, change will be difficult. Most peace proposals since the peace and partnership agreement have envisaged some form of power sharing, but the Houthi movement appears determined to keep its supervisors. It would be a challenge to integrate them formally into state institutions due to their large number and lack of educational qualifications.

There is little international leverage to persuade the Houthis to relent because their external political and economic ties are limited. US and UN sanctions on several Houthi individuals, including banning their bank accounts, have little impact when figures like Abdelmalek al-Houthi or Abu Ali al-Hakim, another senior Houthi military leader, neither travel nor hold Western bank accounts. They maintain only military and intelligence relationships with Iran.

The movement has long lost the élan of a populist movement fighting corruption that it had when it first seized power. The regional and sectarian nature of the group places severe limits on the ability of other areas of Yemen to accept its rule, even among communities that also reject Saudi-UAE military and political intervention. War has tightened the Houthi grip on society, enabled the group to develop a particular ideological culture that runs counter to Yemen's traditions, and created a class of war profiteers to boot.

Corruption and ill-gotten gains were the main reason for popular resentment against Saleh and his successor, Hadi. When the war is over, the Houthis will face new challenges. There will be no more pretexts for corruption, bad governance, brutal oppression and multiple taxation. All these phenomena have created a vast chasm between government and society, and a silent anger against them that they will be wise to fear.

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