

# Houthi Media: A Study in Ideological Warfare





# Houthi Media: A Study in Ideological Warfare

---

By: Burhan Ahmed

June 2, 2024

**Cover photo:** The Houthi movement celebrates the sixth anniversary of its takeover of the capital in Sana'a's Al-Tahrir Square on September 20, 2020. // Sana'a Center photo.



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.

---

# Introduction

In April 2023, a Saudi delegation was invited to visit the Houthi-held capital of Sana'a. Over the next couple of days, the media arm of the Houthi group (Ansar Allah) distributed a series of photographs to international and local media outlets featuring Mahdi al-Mashat, head of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, smiling warmly in a stately reception hall and shaking the hand of Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed bin Saeed al-Jaber.<sup>[1]</sup> These photos were extensively reprinted, appearing on NBC,<sup>[2]</sup> Reuters,<sup>[3]</sup> BBC,<sup>[4]</sup> and Al-Arabiya,<sup>[5]</sup> as well as in local outlets from the Baltics<sup>[6]</sup> to Beijing.<sup>[7]</sup> This sleek image of Houthi diplomacy is far from the militant and adversarial rhetoric circulated by founder Hussein al-Houthi and the outrage voiced by insurgent forces over his killing in 2004. Understanding this radical revision is essential to grasping the dynamics of the complex conflict in Yemen.

This paper seeks to correct the larger trend of analysis focusing predominantly on Houthi military actions or political machinations while overlooking their media strategies. Interviews conducted in Yemen from 2020 to 2021 appear to show that Houthi propaganda can be surprisingly effective: around 80 percent of respondents living in Houthi-held territory in Hudaydah and Ibb said in one survey that they trust their local officials and believe that Houthi-run media, such as television network Al-Masirah, would not publish disinformation.<sup>[8]</sup> While such figures may reflect respondents' fear of retaliation, they may also show the success of the Houthis' long-term propaganda efforts. Since 2015, the group has been propagating a series of narratives, some of which are likely to have resonated, particularly claims that the Saudi coalition has been targeting Yemeni civilians and public infrastructure. In the areas they control, the Houthis have monopolized media platforms, including television, radio, and newspapers, dominating news and other output, such as drama, entertainment, and talk shows. Citizens may have little choice but to rely

[1] "Sana'a Clarifies Saudi Arabia's Role in the Conflict: Not a Mediator [AR]," Ansar Allah Archives, April 11, 2023; <https://web.archive.org/web/20230411204309/https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/596740>

[2] "Saudi Arabia holds talks with Iran-backed Houthis in effort to end Yemen war," NBC News, April 10, 2023; <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/yemen-saudi-arabia-houthis-iran-backed-war-rcna78893>

[3] Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Houthi official says Yemen peace talks made progress, further rounds planned," Reuters, April 14, 2023; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-houthi-peace-talks-yemens-sanaa-conclude-with-further-rounds-planned-2023-04-14/>

[4] Sebastian Usher, "Yemen war: Saudi-Houthi talks bring hope of ceasefire," BBC News, April 9, 2023; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65225981>

[5] "Saudi envoy in Yemen's Houthi-held capital to stabilize peace," Al Arabiya, April 10, 2023; <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2023/04/10/Saudi-envoy-says-in-Yemen-s-rebel-held-capital-to-stabilize-truce->

[6] "Representatives of Saudi Arabia and Oman arrive in Yemen for peace talks with the Houthis," Baltics News, April 10, 2023; <https://baltics.news/2023/04/10/representatives-of-saudi-arabia-and-oman-arrive-in-yemen-for-peace-talks-with-the-houthis/>

[7] "Saudi-Houthi talks spark Yemeni hopes," China Daily, April 11, 2023; <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202304/11/WS6434a1bca31057c47ebb95ca.html>

[8] Hannah Porter, "The Houthi Soft War on Enemy Propaganda," Yemen Policy Center, December 2021, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/the-houthi-soft-war-on-enemy-propaganda/>

on Houthi-controlled outlets for the information they do receive and may find that some of the narratives being pushed match their lived experiences. A deeper analysis of Houthi media and messaging is essential to understanding how they aim to mobilize popular support in Yemen and solidify their authority within the region.

Through a review of the Houthi movement's rhetorical shifts, this paper tracks how the Houthis have moved from presenting themselves as an oppressed minority to a popular revolutionary movement and now as a righteous authority with a divine right to rule. This paper examines messages disseminated across multiple platforms, including broadcasts on two main Houthi news sites, Al-Masirah, which the group owns, and Al-Hawiyah, which supports the movement; radio programming in areas under the group's control, including Al-Masirah Radio and Sam Radio; and the social media posts of Houthi officials. Through investigation of these outputs, it becomes clear that Houthi authorities are continuously adapting their messages to fit new political realities. Examining what the Houthis say about Yemen, the war, and the wider world – and when they say it – reveals the roots of their appeal, anxieties, and ambitions.

## From Sa'ada to Sana'a: Words that Paved the Road to War

In the early 1990s, the Houthi group emerged as a theological movement known for their popular Zaidi religious lectures. Among its early leaders, Hussein al-Houthi gave sermons in closed spaces, such as mosques and summer camps, but his teachings initially had limited circulation. But his supporters soon moved towards a policy of media propagation, hoping to promote a revival in Zaidism, a strand of Shia Islam native to Yemen, and build a platform for this new ideology.<sup>[9]</sup> Recordings of his sermons were distributed throughout Sa'ada, the group's mountainous heartland in northwest Yemen, and leaflets called *malazem*, with transcripts of his political and theological lectures alongside interpretations of the Quran, were printed and distributed throughout several governorates in northern Yemen.<sup>[10]</sup> These sermons presented Al-Houthi's followers as an oppressed minority with beliefs deeply embedded in Yemen's history. Zaidism has existed in Yemen in some form since the 9th century,<sup>[11]</sup> and Zaidi states lasted in different forms all the way up to 1962, when the theocratic state known as the Imamate was overthrown in Yemen's revolution, which ushered in the era of the republic.<sup>[12]</sup> Hussein al-Houthi, his brother

---

[9] Abdulelah Taqi, "Houthi propaganda: following in Hezbollah's footsteps," The New Arab, April 12, 2015; <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/houthi-propaganda-following-hizballahs-footsteps>

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ali Mohammed Zaid, "The Mu'tazila of Yemen, the Hadi State and his Thought [AR]," Sana'a: Yemeni Studies and Research Center, 1985.

[12] A. Aviad Orkaby, "The International History of the Yemen Civil War 1962-1968," Harvard Doctoral Dissertation, April 2014; [https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/12269828/Orkaby\\_gsas.harvard\\_0084L\\_11420.pdf](https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/12269828/Orkaby_gsas.harvard_0084L_11420.pdf)

Mohammed al-Houthi, and others called for a Zaidi religious and cultural revival partly in response to Zaidism's decreased importance in the decades following the revolution and the rise of Wahhabi Salafism in Yemen, which was spreading across the border from Saudi Arabia.<sup>[13]</sup> This fed into a narrative of Zaidi marginalization, whereby Zaidi Islam had "pure" roots in Yemen but was routinely sidelined by political and religious majorities.<sup>[14]</sup> The idea that the Houthis were a group long suffering from oppression became central in their messages to the media for the next decade.

Another core tenet of the Houthis' messaging is that their struggle is not just local but against global forces. This concept is most stark in the Houthis' slogan. "*Allahu Akbar; al-Mawt li-Amrika; al-Mawt li-Isra'il; al-La'na 'ala al-Yahud; al-Nasr li-l-Islam*" – which translates as "God is great; death to America; death to Israel; a curse on the Jews; victory for Islam" – an echo of both Hezbollah's motto and that of the Iranian Revolution.<sup>[15]</sup> This resemblance hints at the linkages of inspiration and support from Shia groups in Lebanon and elsewhere in the region with Iran – which, with the Houthis, form part of the "Axis of Resistance," portraying themselves as opponents of Israel and the United States and defenders against Western domination.

The Houthis claim that their slogan, known as *al-sarkha* (the collective outcry), was first voiced by Hussein al-Houthi in 2002 in tribal areas of north Yemen to "confront the American project in the most dangerous conditions that the *umma* [Muslim nation] has experienced."<sup>[16]</sup> At the time, there was outrage throughout the Middle East over the second Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) and the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq.<sup>[17]</sup> Sa'ada was also on the cusp of war in this period of the early 2000s, and anti-government protests were frequent and populous.<sup>[18]</sup> The slogan served as a call to arms and aimed to convince Yemenis that the Houthi group was an oppressed movement, similar to Palestinian political groups, objecting to the powerful regional influence of the US and Israel.<sup>[19]</sup> Chanting this slogan within Yemen also signaled that protesters were opposed to corruption within the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, whom Houthi media spokesmen had

<sup>[13]</sup> Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "Houthi Monopoly of the Zaidi Sect [AR]," Al-Araby, March 21, 2015; <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/الجوتي-ومهمة-احتكار-الطائفة>

<sup>[14]</sup> Nadwa al-Dawsari, "The Houthis and the Limits of Diplomacy in Yemen," The Middle East Institute, May 6, 2021; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/houthis-and-limits-diplomacy-yemen>

<sup>[15]</sup> Mohammed Almahfali and James Root, "How Iran's Islamic Revolution Does, and Does Not, Influence Houthi Rule in Northern Yemen," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 13, 2020; [https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9050?fbclid=IwARoDia8NwMNpi-TNgb5EAB21m68g4jSnIi62t50OmX2h8XCd\\_whnltUID4%201/14](https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9050?fbclid=IwARoDia8NwMNpi-TNgb5EAB21m68g4jSnIi62t50OmX2h8XCd_whnltUID4%201/14)

<sup>[16]</sup> "Local News Broadcast [AR]," Al-Masirah, June 2, 2022, <https://www.masirahv.net/post/213853/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-02-06-2022>

<sup>[17]</sup> Juan Cole, "Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Twentieth Century," *Macalester International*, Vol. 23, Article 8. 2009; <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1211&context=macintl>

<sup>[18]</sup> Christopher Boucek, "War in Saada: From Local Insurrection to National Challenge," *Carnegie Papers*, Middle East Program, Number 110, April 2010; [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war\\_in\\_saada.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf)

<sup>[19]</sup> Charlie Blomberg, "The Proxy Goes Both Ways: Digital Propaganda of Yemen's Houthi Movement," *The Political Science Review*, Volume 7, 2022, pp. 82-83. <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=ramerican#page=68>

accused of sacrificing Yemeni lives to “appease America.”<sup>[20]</sup>

By 2004, the Houthis’ anti-government activities had begun in rural areas of Sa’ada but spread to the capital, Sana’a, in one incident when crowds of Houthi adherents began chanting the Houthi slogan during Friday prayers at the Great Mosque. In response, the Saleh regime ordered Hussein al-Houthi’s arrest.<sup>[21]</sup> This led to the outbreak of the Sa’ada Wars (2004-2010) between Houthi and government forces, although some argue the Houthis had been preparing for some time for conflict against someone they considered to be an unjust ruler.<sup>[22]</sup> The first stage ended after three months of fighting with the killing of Hussein al-Houthi, but hostilities resumed a few months later. Throughout six years of conflict, Sa’ada governorate was a closed military zone. With few exceptions, reporters were denied entry, and journalists relied on text messages from sources cultivated within Houthi-held territory to report on the conflict.<sup>[23]</sup> This makes it difficult to trace Houthi media during the Sa’ada Wars. In an interview in 2013, Yahya al-Houthi – one of the brothers of the movement’s founder, Hussein al-Houthi – gave a glimpse of the group’s self-image as an oppressed minority: “They [the Saleh regime] exploited the slogan of our brothers, which speaks out against the Americans so that the West would not condemn the targeting of a single religious community, a persecuted minority. Zaidis are globally considered a religious minority. All religious minorities are protected under the UN, who are bound to act to protect them. Nonetheless, the government says they are not fighting Zaidis but fighting the Houthis. They don’t want to admit that they are fighting Zaidism.”<sup>[24]</sup>

Building on the narrative of religious persecution, the Houthis accused the Saleh regime of quietly supporting the expansion of Wahhabi Salafism as it reached across the border from Saudi Arabia into the Sa’ada governorate from the 1980s via religious seminaries, including a school in Damaj. This Wahhabi Salafism was popularized through free-to-attend primary schools, which taught strict Wahhabi Salafist doctrines. It was seen as representing an existential threat to Zaidism/Shi’ism. From a Houthi perspective, Saleh’s aim in this spread of hardline Wahhabi Salafism was rooted in self-interest, courting a powerful regional benefactor in Saudi Arabia while diluting growing Zaidi influence. There is some truth to the claim, though Saleh, himself a Zaidi, had also courted Houthi leaders in the early 2000s as a counterweight to other political rivals. In the same interview, Yahya al-Houthi described the connection between Wahhabi Salafism and Saleh’s motives for war with the Houthis: “Throughout the Sa’ada Wars, Saleh stopped and started the wars according to his own interests alone and [his] capabilities. He was pushed by Saudi

<sup>[20]</sup> “8.30pm News, February 26, 2022 [AR],” Al-Masirah TV, <https://www.masirahtv.net/post/207292/-26-02-2022-النصف-الرئيسية-والثامنة-والنصف-الرئيسية-2022>

<sup>[21]</sup> Christopher Boucek, “War in Saada,” Carnegie Papers, April 2010. [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war\\_in\\_saada.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf)

<sup>[22]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[23]</sup> Abdulelah Taqi, “Houthi propaganda: Following in Hezbollah’s footsteps,” The New Arab, April 12, 2015; <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/houthi-propaganda-following-hizballahs-footsteps>

<sup>[24]</sup> “Yahya Badreddine al-Houthi in an interview with Al-Balagh [AR],” Ansarollah.com, August 4, 2013, <https://www.ansarollah.com/ye/archives/6722>



Arabia and America to start a war for their hegemonic aims and long-term strategy. But all of their policies and actions in Yemen have been for the sake of the Wahhabis, to promote Wahhabism and preserve Wahhabi schools and institutions. They are ready to provoke any war and do not think of the rest of the Yemeni people.”<sup>[25]</sup> In this statement and others, Al-Houthi reiterates that his group is a repressed minority being silenced as it fights for the right to exist.

During the Sa’ada Wars, we also see hints of the Houthis’ coming reinvention as leaders of a popular rebellion with revolutionary ambitions. “Saleh sold religion for Wahhabism; he sold the country for America. So we must fight to keep our country and its wealth in our hands and distribute wealth among the people instead of among officials who give it to the corrupt.”<sup>[26]</sup> This call to action from Yahya al-Houthi, particularly the argument that wealth should return to the hands of the people, struck a chord in poverty-stricken Sa’ada, one of Yemen’s poorest regions.<sup>[27]</sup> While other governorates received the benefits of economic development initiatives, Sa’ada was largely overlooked.<sup>[28]</sup> Poverty mobilized huge numbers of people who didn’t necessarily share the Zaidi faith to rise up against the Saleh regime, a fact that was not missed by Houthi leaders.

---

<sup>[25]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[26]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[27]</sup> Christopher Boucek, “War in Saada,” Carnegie Papers, April 2010, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war\\_in\\_saada.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf)

<sup>[28]</sup> Mohammed Azzan, founder of the Believing Youth movement, a precursor to the Houthi group, said during Yemen’s National Dialogue Conference, “Sa’ada has a complete absence of developmental programs that can assist people to emerge from poverty.” See: Mohammed Azzan, “Saada.. The Roots of the Problem and Proposals for Solutions,” Research paper presented during the NDC, May 28, 2013.

# The Houthi Uprising: Against “The Aggression”

The Houthis had assumed control of most of Sa'ada by 2009 and began to expand into other governorates under a new mantle: as successful revolutionaries, fighting corruption and aiming to redistribute wealth and power. Now beginning to style themselves as a political movement, apparently modeled on Lebanon's Hezbollah, they joined the 2011 popular uprising against the Saleh government and launched a Houthi wing within the revolutionary movement. They took on the official name Ansar Allah, “Partisans of God,” and, echoing the language of revolution, adopted new slogans that called on Yemenis to rise up and fight corruption.<sup>[29]</sup> While the uprising was largely peaceful, the Houthis decided to take a different path, continuing their military expansion under the guise of fighting corruption. In 2011, they advanced on Al-Jawf governorate to fight the “remnants of the Saleh regime.”<sup>[30]</sup> Shortly after, the Houthi movement took over Amran governorate under the slogan “the popular movement against the plutocrats (al-mutanaffidheen).”<sup>[31]</sup> As the revolution continued, the Houthis looked to expand their power. In February 2012, facing overwhelming domestic and international pressure, Saleh stepped down and ceded power to Vice President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi.<sup>[32]</sup>

Amran borders Sana'a, and for generations, the powerful Amran-based Hashid tribe has influenced politics in the capital. Three out of five north Yemeni presidents were from the Hashid tribal confederation.<sup>[33]</sup> The Houthis were able to forge alliances with a number of tribes who resented the Hashids, which rose up against the powerful tribe and its leader, Sadiq al-Ahmar. Sadiq had taken over as paramount sheikh in 2007, after the death of his father, Abdullah al-Ahmar, who had close relations with Saudi Arabia and was a founder of the Islamist Islah party in 1990. The takeover of Amran and the relegation of the Hashid thus marked the beginning of a massive shift in Yemen's networks of power.<sup>[34]</sup>

Adding to public discontent, in 2014, the new Yemeni government – under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank – decided to lift subsidies on oil derivatives, sending prices soaring and prompting heavy backlash. The Houthis took advantage of the tense atmosphere to spread anti-government propaganda. Before the military takeover of Sana'a, Abdelmalek al-Houthi gave a speech broadcast by Al-Masirah, accusing the government of “not respecting

<sup>[29]</sup> Ahmed Nagi, “Yemen's Houthis Used Multiple Identities to Advance,” Carnegie Middle East Center, March 19, 2019. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/19/yemen-s-houthis-used-multiple-identities-to-advance-pub-78623>

<sup>[30]</sup> Amjad Khashafa, *The Fall of the Republic* [AR], (Cairo: Rawae' Foundation for Culture and Publishing, 2020), p. 19.

<sup>[31]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>[32]</sup> “Ali Abdullah Saleh: The deposed president who ruled Yemen for over three decades,” France 24, December 4, 2017; <https://www.france24.com/en/20171204-ali-abdullah-saleh-deposed-president-who-ruled-yemen-over-three-decades>

<sup>[33]</sup> Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, “What Remains of the Hashid's Power? The Rise and Fall of Yemen's Most Powerful Tribe,” Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, September 14, 2023; <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/august-2023/20837>

<sup>[34]</sup> Amjad Khashafa, *The Fall of the Republic* [AR], (Cairo: Rawae' Foundation for Culture and Publishing, 2020), p. 63.



citizens as they ask governments to stop force-feeding them doses of bad medicine,” referring to a popular metaphor for the high prices of oil. Al-Houthi reiterated that the Houthis would physically defend outraged citizens, saying, “We will stand by our people in their legitimate demands,” once more using revolutionary rhetoric to identify with grassroots movements and paving the way for what the Houthis called the “liberation” of Sana’a.<sup>[35]</sup>

As the armed Houthi movement mobilized troops outside Sana’a, military actions were coupled with a strategic takeover of media outlets.<sup>[36]</sup> At the time, the Houthis did not yet wield a large propaganda apparatus. They owned a single satellite television channel, Al-Masirah, which was launched in 2012.<sup>[37]</sup> But that soon changed as the Houthis began to weaponize the media, producing propaganda to mobilize popular support.<sup>[38]</sup> The first major expansion of Houthi propaganda capabilities was in September 2014, when they took over government television channels as well as newspaper offices in Sana’a. As their command over Yemen’s media grew, they shut down independent news outlets and the media arms of political parties and threatened and detained journalists.<sup>[39]</sup> Many journalists in Sana’a were forced to flee the country.<sup>[40]</sup> In 2016, Al-Hawiyah channel was launched and marketed as an independent media outlet in Sana’a, although Sana’a-based journalists reported that the network was founded by the Houthis to create the illusion of balanced reporting.<sup>[41]</sup> Since it is not officially linked to the Houthi movement, Al-Hawiyah’s network can also engage in extreme hate speech without tainting the Houthi movement’s official image.

The Houthis seized the Yemeni capital of Sana’a on September 21, 2014,<sup>[42]</sup> a date very close to the anniversary of the 1962 revolution, which ousted the Imamate and established a republican state in the north.<sup>[43]</sup> In the years since the 2014 takeover, a calibrated media campaign has emerged, in which the Houthis seek to use “Popular Revolution Day” on September 21 to eclipse the celebrations and commemorations of the republican revolution marked on September 26, with events and recurrent messages designed to legitimize their rule. Co-opting symbolism from celebrations

<sup>[35]</sup> Al-Houthi prepares the belt around the capital and threatens the government in a strong language to undo the dose [AR], Al-Hawiyah channel, August 15, 2014; <https://www.alhawiyah.com/news/news/8316>

<sup>[36]</sup> Hakim Almasari, Martin Chulov, “Yemen state news agency and TV station seized by Shia Houthi Rebels,” The Guardian, January 19, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/19/yemen-state-news-agency-tv-station-seized-by-shia-rebels>

<sup>[37]</sup> Mohammad Abdelsalam, “Announcement on Launch of Al-Masirah Channel [AR],” BBC Monitoring Middle East, Twitter, January 27, 2012; <https://twitter.com/BBCMonitoring/status/117861519477526272>

<sup>[38]</sup> Ammar Naji, “The Unspoken Agenda of Houthi Digital Poetry in Yemen’s Current War Crisis,” Arab Media & Society, February 27, 2022; <https://www.arabmediasociety.com/the-unspoken-agenda-of-houthi-digital-poetry-in-yemens-current-war-crisis/>

<sup>[39]</sup> Maggie Michael, “Ex-inmates: Torture rife in prisons run by Yemen rebels,” Associated Press, December 7, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/yemen-ap-top-news-houthis-middle-east-prisons-e32442a4c8c24acd9d362c433d5cd10e>

<sup>[40]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[41]</sup> Mohammed Nasser, “Trial of Yemeni Activists Raises Notion of ‘Settling Scores’ among Houthi Factions,” Asharq al-Awsat, January 15, 2015; <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4099086/trial-yemeni-activists-raises-notion-%E2%80%99settling-scores%E2%80%99-among-houthi-factions>

<sup>[42]</sup> “Yemen: Houthi leader hails ‘revolution,’” BBC News, September 24, 2014; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29338034>

<sup>[43]</sup> “Yemenis celebrating 26 September revolution: History repeats itself but we will conquer!,” Al Shawa News, September 27, 2022; <https://www.alsahwa-yemen.net/en/p-60928>

of the 1962 revolution, Al-Hawiyah often focuses on a flame lighting ceremony, which has been an annual tradition associated with the birth of the republic.<sup>[44]</sup> As proof of popular support for the September 21 “revolution,” the Houthi-run network Al-Masirah broadcasts video footage of celebratory crowds and civil works projects in Sa’ada, Taiz, and Hudaydah.<sup>[45]</sup> This mix of messages - national development alongside patriotic history - shows that the Houthis are keen to present their territorial expansion not as a local power grab or as an extension of the earlier Imamate but as the latest episode in Yemen’s long history of revolutionary struggle.

The Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, launched a military campaign in Yemen on March 26, 2015, with the stated goal of reinstalling the internationally recognized government to power in Sana’a. In response, the Houthis quickly adapted their messaging to highlight the injustice of a foreign invasion and build pride in Houthi forces for defending the nation against an outside attack.<sup>[46]</sup> It was at this time that the Houthis began field testing a new term – “the aggression.”<sup>[47]</sup> This phrase lumped together the coalition (the invading aggression) with the internationally recognized government (the internal aggression), framing them as one enemy of the Yemeni people.<sup>[48]</sup> Houthi programming repeatedly claims that the group continues to fight the coalition to “defend the country and its sovereignty from external aggression”<sup>[49]</sup> and reiterates that they are prepared to fight for years to come.

Although the internationally recognized government is a major party in the conflict, Houthi media has almost completely stopped mentioning it by name. From 2015 until today, the government has been mostly referred to as “mercenaries,” part of the “aggression,” or as an anonymous “militia.”<sup>[50][51]</sup> The Houthis understand the narrative power of naming their enemies. Their preferred image is that of David confronting the Goliath of Saudi Arabia.<sup>[52]</sup> If this representation of their monolithic enemy collapses into smaller local actors, particularly opposition groups in southern Yemen, their story disintegrates. Thus, the Houthis resisted naming a long record of

<sup>[44]</sup> “The September 21 Revolution, the End of the Mandate, and Building a New Yemen [AR],” Al-Hawiyah channel, September 21, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdGPFfnOTGc>

<sup>[45]</sup> “Local News [AR],” Al-Masirah, September 21, 2022, <https://www.masirahtv.net/post/220190/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-25-02-1444-%D9%87%D9-21-09-2022-%D9%85>

<sup>[46]</sup> “Saudi Arabia Launches Air Strikes in Yemen,” BBC, March 26, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-32061632>

<sup>[47]</sup> Safa’a Saleh, “Mohammed Ali Al-Houthi in a statement to Al-Masry Al-Youm: Our forces are not affected... and the Yemeni army is under our control [AR],” Al-Masry Al-Youm, March 28, 2015, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/690888>. Author’s note: This statement occurred only two days after Saudi Arabia announced its military intervention, and was one of the first occasions when the term “aggression” was used to describe Saudi actions in Yemen. The term “the aggression” became synonymous with Saudi Arabia in subsequent Houthi rhetoric.

<sup>[48]</sup> “The occupation coalition and its economic wars on Yemen [AR],” Al-Hawiyah channel, February 26, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vdFkAYrRpg>

<sup>[49]</sup> “8:30 PM News Bulletin [AR],” Al-Masirah TV, March 26, 2022, <https://www.masirahtv.net/post/209467/-26-03-2022-النشرة-الثامنة-والنصف-الرئيسية>

<sup>[50]</sup> “The occupation coalition and its economic wars on Yemen [AR],” Al-Hawiyah channel, February 26, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vdFkAYrRpg>; in this video, *Islah* is referred to as a “militia in Marib.”

<sup>[51]</sup> “Eid al-Ghadeer celebrations in Yemen [AR],” Al-Hawiyah channel, June 18, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El-Rzlx53Gw>; in this video the government is referred to as “the aggression’s militia and its mercenaries in Taiz.”

<sup>[52]</sup> Abdulghani al-Iryani, “Deciphering the Houthi Narratives and How They Won the Lobby Wars,” American Center for South Yemen Virtual Panel, Twitter, April 29, 2023.

local enemies, instead choosing to dismiss resistance to their rule as the work of mercenaries hired by foreign governments.

Coalition airstrikes have been hugely destructive; human rights organizations estimate that they are responsible for more than 19,200 civilian deaths or maimings from 2015 through 2023.<sup>[53]</sup> With complete control over the media in Houthi-held territory, Houthi news outlets began to represent this massive loss of life as a sacrifice, and those who died became martyrs, or shaheed, instead of victims of war.<sup>[54]</sup> The Houthis began as a religious movement, and this remains central to their identity, though t secular groups and governments in the Arab world also refer to those who die in battle as martyrs. Still, the concept of martyrdom has a particularly mythological appeal in Houthi-held territory, and Houthis connect all past, present, and future martyrs to the sacrificial example of their group's founder. In a 2017 interview on Al-Masirah, Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdelsalam discussed Hussein al-Houthi's death, saying, "his martyrdom had a huge impact, like that of Imam Hussein's martyrdom in Karbala, which was followed by battles that continue to this day."<sup>[55]</sup> In this sentence, the past and present collide – tales from the Islamic tradition about historical battles, betrayals, and sacrifices reverberate alongside fresh losses. The Houthis use martyrdom to bind together memories of the schism in Islam between Sunni and Shia, a political assassination, and the suffering caused by arbitrary civilian deaths.

From 2015 until the April 2022 truce, Saudi Arabia's bombs fell like rain on Sana'a. In one 2017 incident, a single missile fired from Houthi-held territory was met with 29 coalition airstrikes within a 24-hour period.<sup>[56]</sup> Documenting the destruction of war helped the Houthis appeal to neutral parties and even groups who had previously been their adversaries in Yemen. Through images, video, and reports on Houthi-controlled news sites, it made it clear that the coalition not only hit Houthi targets but also government infrastructure, archeological and historic sites, such as the old city of Sana'a, and densely populated civilian neighborhoods.

The Houthis rapidly grew their ranks by exploiting local shock and grief over the outsized number of civilian casualties from airstrikes and continued to promote their forces as freedom fighters.<sup>[57]</sup> Realizing the mobilizing effect of coalition brutality, Houthi media began to focus more on the fight rather than fallen soldiers. Narratives describing their armed struggle against "the aggression"<sup>[58]</sup> became more polished; Houthi spokesmen still discussed the moral values of martyrdom, but

<sup>[53]</sup> "Yemen: Populations at Risk," Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, February 28, 2023. <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/yemen/>

<sup>[54]</sup> Sam Radio, Yallah Ridak Show, December 13, 2022.

<sup>[55]</sup> Hannah Porter, "Screaming in the Face of the Arrogant: Understanding the Logic and Symbolism of Yemen's Huthi Movement," University of Chicago Thesis, May 2018, p. 14. [https://www.academia.edu/38151253/\\_Screaming\\_in\\_the\\_Face\\_of\\_the\\_Arrogant\\_Understanding\\_the\\_Logic\\_and\\_Symbolism\\_of\\_Yemen\\_s\\_Huthi\\_Movement](https://www.academia.edu/38151253/_Screaming_in_the_Face_of_the_Arrogant_Understanding_the_Logic_and_Symbolism_of_Yemen_s_Huthi_Movement)

<sup>[56]</sup> Faisal Edroos, "Saudi air strikes rain down on Yemen's capital Sanaa," Al Jazeera, November 5, 2017; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/5/saudi-air-strikes-rain-down-on-yemens-capital-sanaa>

<sup>[57]</sup> Abdulghani al-Iryani, "Deciphering the Houthi Narratives and How They Won the Lobby Wars," American Center for South Yemen Virtual Panel, Twitter, April 29, 2023.

<sup>[58]</sup> "8:30 PM News Bulletin [AR]," Al-Masirah TV, February 26, 2022. <https://www.masirahtv.net/post/207292/-26-02-2022-نشرة-الثامنة-والنصف-الرئيسية>



primarily on rural radio programs such as Sam Radio, in a clear attempt to call people to arms. During a 2022 program, radio hosts described inaction during the conflict as traitorous and unworthy, calling on listeners to fight on behalf of the martyred “a’alam al-huda,” a term referring to the descendants of Imam Ali who have been killed, most notably the historical figure Husayn ibn Ali, but also the Houthi movement’s founder, Hussein al-Houthi.<sup>[59]</sup> This comparison implicitly divides Yemenis into those who are loyal, devout, and patriotic potential martyrs with an unassailable religious justification for violence and those who are not. Such divisive messaging is entirely absent from the group’s international propaganda campaigns and represents a clear separation between messages sent to rural Yemen and those broadcast to an international audience. Outside Yemen, on the Al-Masirah network, the Houthis describe their movement as a unified popular revolution.<sup>[60]</sup> Meanwhile, messages conveyed to rural Yemenis sow division. Enemies are identified, and emotionally charged religious rhetoric is used to call for people to join in military action.<sup>[61]</sup>

The Houthi slogan, “God is great; death to America; death to Israel; a curse on the Jews; victory for Islam,” which carried insurgents into their first military action in 2004, was an effective mobilization tool for many years but needed to be softened as the Houthis settled into Sana’a as a ruling authority.<sup>[62]</sup> By 2022, the slogan had adapted itself to fit an agenda that was more political than militant. Instead of being chanted by men wielding Kalashnikovs, a polished spokesman in a crisp gray suit discussed its popular appeal and justification: “This slogan was a countermeasure to the silence [of] former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, enforced as America and Israel continued to take power in the region and launched a massive global attack on the Palestinians.”<sup>[63]</sup> The newscaster went on to reiterate the Houthi narrative that Saleh launched the Sa’ada Wars to punish the Houthis for their “anti-American position.”<sup>[64]</sup> In other broadcasts, the same slogan was used to denounce the United Arab Emirates’ normalization with Israel, positioning the Houthis as a regional defender of Palestinian rights.<sup>[65]</sup> Al-Masirah’s moderate interpretation of the slogan suggests that Houthis are a pan-Arab and pan-Islamic movement whose political objectives are not limited to Yemen, as they struggle against the forces of imperialism and the legacies of colonialism throughout the Islamic world.

---

<sup>[59]</sup> Sam Radio, December 10, 2022, recorded by the author.

<sup>[60]</sup> “8:30 PM News Bulletin [AR],” Al-Masirah, February 26, 2023, <https://www.masirahtv.net/post/207292/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%A9-26-02-2022>

<sup>[61]</sup> Sam Radio, December 10, 2022, recorded by the author.

<sup>[62]</sup> Rod Nordland and Eric Schmidt, “Experts see signs of moderation despite the Houthis harsh slogan,” New York Times, January 24, 2015; <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/25/world/middleeast/experts-see-signs-of-moderation-despite-houthis-harsh-slogans.html>

<sup>[63]</sup> “Local News Broadcast [AR],” Al-Masirah, June 2, 2022.

<sup>[64]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[65]</sup> “The decision to extend the truce in Yemen [AR],” Al-Hawiyah, June 3, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMJboHDZKX8>

## A Divine Right to Rule

The Houthis have gradually introduced through the media an adaptation of wilayah – a theological and political concept broadly meaning the power of authority or guardianship held by an individual, community, or government – to describe a divine right to lead the country politically and religiously.<sup>[66]</sup> Houthis believe that Abdelmalek al-Houthi's lineage as a descendant of Ali bin Abi Taleb, a cousin of the Prophet Mohammed and husband of his daughter Fatima, elevates him to a position of authority over all Yemenis, who are required to accept his rule,<sup>[67]</sup> and that any alternate political structures represent a deep injustice that circumvents Zaidi doctrine.<sup>[68]</sup> The concept of wilayah allows the Houthi leader to centralize theocratic and political power in his hands, making him the supreme authority for economic, judicial, and national security bodies rather than the Yemeni constitution or legislative institutions.<sup>[69]</sup> It also restructures the relationship with authority to one based on obedience and compliance, depriving Yemenis of the right to their own opinions in political or religious matters. The Houthi concept of wilayah restricts leadership or the right to rule to those within the al-Houthi bloodline, a radical shift in Yemen's political structure. Perhaps this is why the topic was absent from mainstream Houthi propaganda for many years, only circulating in the group's more extreme wings.<sup>[70]</sup> Wilayah began resurfacing in Abdelmalek al-Houthi's "Wilayah Day" speeches from 2015 until 2019,<sup>[71]</sup> when the Houthis began a campaign of mass popularization of Shia holidays, beginning with Eid al-Ghadeer.<sup>[72]</sup>

Public influence campaigns on Wilayah Day, celebrated on the 18th of Dhul Hijjah, the final month of the Islamic calendar,<sup>[73]</sup> attempt to inspire loyalty for Houthi authorities by reiterating that the only alternative to this system of belief is "loyalty to the Zionists, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE."<sup>[74]</sup> Internally distributed publicity describes those that violate wilayah as "hypocrites," or takfiri, a term usually used to refer to radical Sunni Islamist groups like the Islamic State that declare other

<sup>[66]</sup> "Houthis won't consider any initiative that dismisses Wilayah, says militant," Al Shawa News, February 25, 2021. <https://www.alsahwa-yemen.net/en/p-45330>

<sup>[67]</sup> Noman Ahmed, Mahmoud Shamsan, "Analysis: Origins of the Houthi Supremacist Ideology," Commonsense, August 23, 2022; <https://www.commonspace.eu/analysis/analysis-origins-houthi-supremacist-ideology>

<sup>[68]</sup> Sam Radio, December 10, 2022, recorded by the author.

<sup>[69]</sup> Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "Entrenched Power: The Houthi System of Governance," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 11, 2022; <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/june-2022/18144>

<sup>[70]</sup> Abdulghani al-Iryani, "The Houthis' Fatal Military Success," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 13, 2021; <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15224>

<sup>[71]</sup> "Text of the speech of the Leader of the Revolution, Sayyid Abdul-Malik Badr al-Din al-Houthi, on the occasion of State Day 1440 [AR]," Ansar Allah Official Archives, August 19, 2019; <https://web.archive.org/web/20221128044547/https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/271594>. Quote: "We emphasize the importance of commemorating this occasion, Wilayah, first as an occasion to express our gratitude to God..."

<sup>[72]</sup> Ali Ragab, "Wilayah Day: Houthis Dye Yemen's Streets with Iranian Facets," The Portal, August 21, 2019; <https://www.theportal-center.com/2019/08/wilayah-day-houthis-dye-yemens-streets-with-iranian-facets/>

<sup>[73]</sup> "Sayyid Abdulmalik Al-Houthi: The Principle Of Guardianship Guarantees The Continuity Of The Divine Path And Bridges The Gap In Front Of The Enemies [AR]," Ansar Allah Archives, August 8, 2020; <https://web.archive.org/web/20220703114146/https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/362587>

<sup>[74]</sup> Sam Radio, December 10, 2022, recorded by the author.

Muslims to be infidels.<sup>[75]</sup> “Hypocrite” is often used to describe Muslims who present themselves as believers while their actions contradict Islam, but in the Houthi context, it means those who reject their concept of wilayah. These terms are, then, clearly sectarian and a clear departure from most of Houthi media’s international messaging, which, by contrast, underscores religious coexistence and tolerance. On Wilayah Day, Houthi media campaigns on Al-Masirah’s network repeat that wilayah is not sectarian, as this religious belief has historically been a part of the Yemeni identity as “an extension of the mandate of Allah, his Messenger, and Imam Ali and a part of the religious identity of Yemenis for the past 14 centuries [...] It is an occasion for celebration across religious and sectarian lines.”<sup>[76]</sup> This does not acknowledge that only a minority of Yemenis believe in the Zaidi Houthi conceptualization of wilayah, a number some estimate to be as low as 10 percent.<sup>[77]</sup> Meanwhile, in rural Yemen, listeners are being told that anyone who doesn’t believe in the absolute, divine authority of Houthi leaders is not truly Muslim, legitimizing violence against those labeled as takfiris.

Wilayah Day is one of many holidays central to Houthi propaganda that were rarely celebrated in Yemen until Houthi authorities mandated their observation.<sup>[78]</sup> After the Houthis took control of Sana’a in 2014, they began introducing new secular and religious holidays – Slogan Day, Popular Revolution Day, Resilience Day, Martyrs’ Day, Mawlid Day (the Prophet’s birthday), and Wilayah Day – along with lavish events and influence campaigns to accompany them. With radio programs in rural Yemen and social media campaigns to target city dwellers, the Houthis displayed a sharp understanding of the type of content that would interest each audience.

Because rural Yemenis are generally less educated and thus more vulnerable to influence campaigns, the Houthis used bolder methods there. A common approach is an intense focus on religious issues and loaded Islamic terms to project righteous authority and moral excellence. This tactic has a widespread emotional appeal. On rural radio programs, Houthis successfully present themselves as pious and benevolent leaders, offering an alternative to a corrupt and invasive Saudi influence. *Zawamil* (sing. *zamil*), a traditional tribal form of poetry that the Houthis have adapted for propaganda and military mobilization, are played on repeat, a classic conditioning method.<sup>[79]</sup> On “Yallah Ridak,” a program on Sam Radio, two men discuss crowds gathering for Mawlid, the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, while rousing music plays in the background.<sup>[80]</sup> The main topic is presented in the form of a debate with a guest, and calls are taken from listeners, although dissenting views are rarely shared. Clips of Saudi opposition activists are played during the talk show – one of the clips features an activist living abroad who criticizes the Saudi regime. In the clip, he talks about the masses of Houthis gathered for Mawlid, saying that

<sup>[75]</sup> “Eid al-Ghadeer Celebrations in Yemen [AR],” Al-Hawiyah channel, June 18, 2022; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El-Rzlx53Gw>

<sup>[76]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[77]</sup> Mehdi Khajali, “Yemen’s Zaidis: A Window for Iranian Influence,” Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, February 2, 2015; <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-zaidis-window-iranian-influence>

<sup>[78]</sup> Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, “The Mandatory Celebration of Hardship,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, November 14, 2022; <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/october-2022/18995>

<sup>[79]</sup> On *zawamil*, see Steve Caton, “*Peaks of Yemen I summon*”: Poetry as cultural practice in a North Yemeni tribe. (Berkeley/Oxford: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>[80]</sup> Sam Radio, Yallah Ridak show, October 17, 2011, recorded by the author.



this is “a message from the Houthis that they have become a powerful regional actor for Islam.”<sup>[81]</sup> He laments that Saudi Arabia “lost the battle in Yemen, not militarily, but socially.”<sup>[82]</sup> The other speaker is a religious scholar opposed to Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi Salafist religious discourse. The scholar begins to discuss the Mawlid celebrations, saying that “Yemen is more prepared than any other country to restore Islam to its roots because of its [Houthi] Quranic school.”<sup>[83]</sup> In this one program, several classic propaganda techniques are at play. A seemingly neutral third party confirms the moral supremacy of Houthi religious leadership, patriotism is mixed with religious indoctrination, and a false binary is implied: only two political choices exist in Yemen - the righteous path of Houthi authority or social control by corrupt and immoral Saudi proxies.

To reach urban audiences, the Houthis are very active on social media. They use hashtags, share video clips, retweet announcements from Houthi officials, and retweet messages from politicians who oppose Houthi ideology to accuse them of working for foreign actors. Images and videos are often used to spread their political and religious messages, as Yemeni youth are more technologically literate and more likely to use social media platforms. These methods demonstrate the Houthis' investment in these platforms for strategic messaging.

On Slogan Day, to reiterate their defense of the Palestinian cause, the Houthis used video clips of children in formation yelling out in unison: “We are coming, Jerusalem, the soldiers of Allah.”<sup>[84]</sup> During Resilience Day in 2022 – held on March 26 every year to mark the launch of the Saudi-led coalition's involvement – Houthi social media sought to inspire outrage against the kingdom, along with the United States and Britain, for supporting it. To do this, they used social media to report the deaths of two boys in a coalition airstrike, with a horrifying image of the severely burned children, adding that the US and Britain “did not condemn this attack although the pictures went viral around the world.”<sup>[85]</sup> Resilience Day often takes a conspiratorial turn, and posts directed at urban audiences focus on Houthis protecting Yemenis from “mercenaries” and “the aggression's cells” hiding among them.<sup>[86]</sup> This represents a small but important shift in the discussion of the Houthis' security capacity. In Yemen's cities, the enemy is not outside the country but hiding among neighbors, and officials show images of Houthi forces capturing and detaining local people in opposition “cells” within the areas under their control.<sup>[87]</sup> There have been many instances on social media of Houthi officials announcing that they have detained individuals on charges of working for the coalition or the internationally recognized government.<sup>[88]</sup>

<sup>[81]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[82]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[83]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[84]</sup> Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, Twitter post, “On a visit to a number of students of the summer schools in the Dhamar governorate #ComingOJerusalem [AR],” June 2, 2022, [https://twitter.com/M\\_N\\_Albukhaiti/status/1532428740344545281](https://twitter.com/M_N_Albukhaiti/status/1532428740344545281)

<sup>[85]</sup> Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, Twitter post, “Picture of two Yemeni children after being subject to an airstrike in the beginning of the aggression [AR],” March 26, 2022, [https://twitter.com/M\\_N\\_Albukhaiti/status/1507468787804737536](https://twitter.com/M_N_Albukhaiti/status/1507468787804737536).

<sup>[86]</sup> “The Result of Seven Years of Resilience [AR],” Al-Hawiyah channel, March 26, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yvXgEVbWDC>

<sup>[87]</sup> See Sharaf Abdullah, Twitter post, “Confessions of cells affiliated with the Islah Party from #Sanaa and #Amran [AR],” November 13, 2017; <https://twitter.com/Alsharaf38/status/929805788645818368> and, “An interior ministry spokesman reveals details of the big security operation 'ruin their acts' [AR],” Saba.net, February 15, 2020; <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3087764.htm>

<sup>[88]</sup> “Yemen: Judge Arrested After Criticizing Houthis,” Human Rights Watch, January 30, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/30/yemen-judge-arrested-after-criticizing-houthis>

In their marketing of what they term the September 21 Revolution to urban Yemeni audiences, Houthi officials took to local news channels to describe the seizure of Sana'a as a "course correction for all previous revolutions."<sup>[89]</sup> Since unemployment is common among the young urban workforce, the economy was a popular talking point. Houthi leaders discussed plans to raise civilian incomes as a part of their "vision to build a modern Yemeni state."<sup>[90]</sup> In one demonstration of success, the Houthis hosted military analysts and broadcast videos of Houthi weapons, marketing them as locally manufactured and thus a source of income for local people.<sup>[91]</sup> This was combined with reminders that the internationally recognized government is corrupt and oppressive <sup>[92]</sup> and that they represent "the internal aggression."<sup>[93]</sup> By offering an alternative system of governance, the Houthis claim to have enacted a revolution that "succeeded in achieving stability for the people and building national cohesion. Houthi rule has ended corruption and established military and security forces that actually serve the people."<sup>[94]</sup> It is not clear whether or not these extensive propaganda campaigns have convinced urban populations of the moral value of this purported Houthi revolution, but it has certainly stopped people from questioning their new reality. Overall, when looking at the substance and objectives of specific Houthi propaganda efforts and the methods they use within Yemen, in both urban and rural settings, it becomes clear that the Houthis are using ideological, political, and emotional appeals to cement their authority.

---

<sup>[89]</sup> "The September 21 Revolution, the End of the Mandate, and Building a New Yemen [AR]," Al-Hawiyah channel, September 21, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdGPfjnOTGc>

<sup>[90]</sup> Sam Radio, Yallah Ridak show, December 20, 2022, recorded by the author.

<sup>[91]</sup> "The September 21 Revolution, the End of the Mandate, and Building a New Yemen [AR]," Al-Hawiyah channel, September 21, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdGPfjnOTGc>

<sup>[92]</sup> Sam Radio, Yallah Ridak show, December 20, 2022, recorded by the author.

<sup>[93]</sup> Sam Radio, Yallah Ridak show, December 25, 2022, recorded by the author.

<sup>[94]</sup> "The September 21 Revolution, the End of the Mandate, and Building a New Yemen [AR]," Al-Hawiyah channel, September 21, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdGPfjnOTGc>

## War and Peace

Houthi propaganda has proven remarkably adaptive and often gives insight into the groups' overall military and political strategies. After the Sa'ada Wars, the Yemeni public at large found the Houthi narrative of victimhood intrusive and alienating, so public messaging shifted toward revolutionary and populist rhetoric. The Houthis have written and rewritten their messages to adapt to shifting times, political exigencies, battlefield realities, geopolitics, and domestic pressures – with Houthi-controlled outlets spinning new messages, adjusting vitriol and claims of moral superiority to palatable levels, and reacting to events as they occur. However, we have not yet seen a complete departure from the group's core messages. Saudi overreach remains at the heart of Houthi discontent. Amid recent negotiations for peace, Mohammed al-Houthi tweeted: "Riyadh is an aggressor in the war, not a mediator."<sup>[95]</sup>

But even this rhetoric has evolved. While at war with the Saudi-led coalition, the Houthis focused negative press toward Saudi Arabia, the internationally recognized government, and the US. The Houthis have consistently positioned Saudi Arabia as the main party in the conflict, as seen in their prolific use of the term "Saudi aggression" and the focus on coalition airstrikes and deteriorating living conditions due to the "Saudi blockade."<sup>[96]</sup> Now, negotiations over Riyadh's exit from the war have produced another adaptation in Houthi propaganda. After April 2, 2022, when the truce was announced, Al-Masirah began repeating video flashbacks of Sana'a in rubble, reeling from coalition airstrikes. In March 2023, almost a full year into the truce, Abdelmalek al-Houthi accused the coalition of having attempted genocide in Yemen by "direct shelling with lethal weapons; killing and destroying residential areas, neighborhoods, homes, and markets, [and] targeting social events, schools, mosques, hospitals, and roads [...] with the aim of killing the largest number of people [...] The tragic scenes were video-documented and circulated to show the devastation wrought by these airstrikes, the martyrs and the wounded as a result of these attacks, and the painful scenes that evoke human compassion in those who still have an iota of human feeling."<sup>[97]</sup> The revival of headlines describing destruction at a time of prolonged, if fragile, peace coincided with Houthi-Saudi negotiations. By choosing to double down on this message, it seems that Houthi envoys hope to collect hefty reparations for war damages from Saudi Arabia.

There are also limited examples of the truce taming Houthi messaging. Following the prisoner exchange deal in April 2023, Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdelsalam said that the deal represents "a positive step that must be built upon, along with other steps taken to ease restrictions on the port of Hudaydah and resume flights

<sup>[95]</sup> Mohammed al-Houthi, Twitter post, "What's coming out of the media, regarding the GCC's call for dialogue [AR]," March 15, 2023; [https://x.com/Moh\\_Alhouthi/status/1503790380021686281](https://x.com/Moh_Alhouthi/status/1503790380021686281)

<sup>[96]</sup> Author's general analysis of Houthi rhetoric during the war. Analysis was formed by watching daily news on Al-Masirah and Al-Hawiyah from February 26, 2022 to March 26, 2022, and by reading content posted by Houthi official Mohammed al-Bukhaiti over this period.

<sup>[97]</sup> "Text of the speech of Sayyid Abdelmalek Badr al-Din al-Houthi on the occasion of the National Day of Resilience [AR]," Ansar Allah Archives, March 27, 2023; <https://web.archive.org/web/20230326235430/https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/593793>



between Sana'a airport and Jordan. We don't want the path of war, and we believe we are now progressing further toward peace."<sup>198</sup> However, this moderation seems to be the exception, not evidence of a new, more measured Houthi approach to international diplomacy. As peace talks progressed and Houthi envoys traveled to Riyadh in September, Houthi media was still describing Saudi Arabia as an "aggressive and occupying force" while calling the government and its army "proxy mercenaries" for Saudi Arabia.

The combative approach was laid clear in a speech by Abdelmalek al-Houthi, broadcast on Al-Masirah in early 2023 when he said that although the current phase is one of de-escalation mediated by Oman, "nonetheless, this phase will not last long." He warned the coalition that it should "work swiftly to reach an agreement on humanitarian remittance of salaries. If this is not realized, we will not be deprived of a national revolution." He ended with the declaration that the Houthis were "ready for war at any moment."<sup>199</sup> The specter of violence haunts the messages, continuing to fan long-held grievances driving the conflict while at the same time presenting the Houthi movement as peacemakers. If their extensive demands for war compensation, payment of government employee salaries, and road reopenings are conditions for a truce, what consequences will Yemen face if these demands are not met? The elusiveness of a political solution to the war speaks volumes. Taken together, the Houthis are deepening the ideological groundwork in Yemen for a new generation fueled by xenophobia, historical grievances, and revenge: apparent preparation for further armed conflict.

<sup>198</sup> "Local News [AR]," Al-Masirah website, April 14, 2023, <https://www.masirahtv.net/post/231644/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%A9-23-09-1444-%D9%87%D9-14-04-2023-%D9%85>

<sup>199</sup> "Local News [AR]," Al-Masirah website, February 17, 2023, <https://www.masirahtv.net/post/228599/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%A9-26-07-1444-%D9%87%D9-17-02-2023-%D9%85>

**Burhan Ahmed** is a Yemeni researcher writing under a pseudonym.

*This paper is part of a series of publications produced by the Sana'a Center and funded by the government of the Kingdom of The Netherlands. The series explores issues within economic, political and environmental themes, aiming to inform discussion and policymaking related to Yemen that foster sustainable peace. Views expressed within should not be construed as representing the Sana'a Center or the Dutch government.*



[WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG](http://WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG)

