

Targeting the Houthi Leadership is Not a Game-Changer



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Cover photo: Yemeni children pray next to a grave at a cemetery in Sana'a city on March 30, 2025 // 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.

The US administration's recent airstrikes against the Houthis in Yemen mark a strategic shift, as Washington is now explicitly targeting the Houthi leadership in its efforts to restore freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. While the assassination of Houthi leaders would no doubt be a blow to the group, it's unclear whether the tactic would threaten its survival, as the group has displayed great adaptability during past domestic and regional crises.

US President Donald Trump has **emphasized** that the attacks on Houthi-held areas of Yemen hit "terrorists' bases, leaders, and missile defenses." National Security Advisor Michael Waltz claimed that early rounds of strikes had "taken out key Houthi leadership, including their head **missileer**," although without providing any evidence. The emphasis on targeting the Houthi leadership marks a shift from US operations in Yemen under former President **Joe Biden**, which focused on degrading the offensive capabilities of the group and thwarting imminent threats to commercial ships passing through the Red Sea.

America's tough new stance on the Houthis, if anything, echoes that of the Israeli government. Since 2024, Israeli officials have launched five attacks against Yemen and repeatedly threatened to "**decapitate**" the Houthi leadership, mirroring actions taken against Hamas and Hezbollah throughout 2024. The language used suggests a growing alignment between the US and Israel's policy on Yemen and the Red Sea.

Family-Based Leadership

But comparing the Houthis to movements like Hamas and Hezbollah is not particularly useful, as tactics employed against the latter will not necessarily result in the same success. What sets the Houthis apart is the family structure that underpins the group and its adeptness in navigating the leadership transitions that have taken place since the group's foundation.

Since the 1980s, the group that would become known as the Houthis has been associated with the surname of its founder, Hussein al-Houthi, and his father, Badreddin al-Houthi, the group's ideologue. To reach a broader Yemeni audience, the Houthis started to call themselves *Ansar Allah* (Partisans of God) in 2011. This was arguably intended to expand their appeal beyond their narrow geographical and familial base; the surname Al-Houthi is said to have derived from the city of **Huth** in Amran, a governorate north of the capital in Sana'a.^[1]

The group has been predominantly led by members of the Al-Houthi family from Saa'da, the northernmost governorate of Yemen, which borders Saudi Arabia. Many family members have had central roles in the movement's political bureau and institutions. Abdelkhaleq al-Houthi, the younger brother of current leader Abdelmalek, heads the Reserve Force and serves as commander of the Central Military Region. The older brother of Abdelmalek, Yahya al-Houthi, formerly served as Minister of Education, and his uncle Abdelkarim is the Minister of Interior and

^[1] Abdullah Hamidaddin (eds.), *The Huthi Movement in Yemen. Ideology, Ambition, and Security in the Arab Gulf*, I.B. Tauris Bloomsbury, 2022, p.11 note 3.

Chief of the Executive Office. Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, Abdelmalek's cousin, is the former chairman of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee and oversees the movement's supervisors in each governorate. The family's involvement in political and military affairs is not only about nepotism, as in other authoritarian and de facto governments: it is closely tied to their lineage. Members of the Al-Houthi family claim *saada* (sing. *sayyid*) status, meaning descent from the Prophet Mohammed, and belong to the Zaydi religious elite who ruled northern Yemen during the imamate (897-1962).

Two Generations of Leaders

The Houthis have successfully navigated leadership changes in the past. They survived their founder's assassination and adapted to a new domestic and regional context, allowing them to expand their ambitions, political-military relations, and audience. In 2004, founder and leader Hussein al-Houthi was killed by the Yemeni army during the first battle of the Sa'ada Wars (2004-10). This contributed to a Shia-rooted narrative of martyrdom that supported the evolution and growth of the movement. Hussein was a product of Badreddin's first marriage, with a woman from the Khawlan bin 'Amr tribal confederation,^[2] so he had both *sayyid* and *qabili* (tribal) lineage. Badreddin's marriages are crucial to understanding how the Houthis have penetrated the social fabric of northern Yemen, which is centered on tribes and their influence in politics, economics, and the military.

Hussein's successor, Abdelmalek, steered the Houthis' transformation from a local guerrilla movement to a regional player with the support of combatants who fought in the Saa'da wars against the army and pro-government tribal Salafi militias. Abdelmalek, Hussein's half-brother, is from Badreddin's fourth marriage with a *sayyid* woman. Hussein and Abdelmalek belong to different generations (the first born in approximately 1960, and the second in 1980), and Abdelmalek has gradually promoted a younger network of mid-level and apical leaders whose political and armed experience dates from the 2011 uprising and the 2014 coup and subsequent war. Among them was Salah al-Sammad, who served as the president of the Houthi Supreme Political Council prior to his killing during a Saudi-led coalition **airstrike** in Hudaydah in 2018. Al-Sammad, the highest-ranking Houthi official killed in the war to date, was replaced by a more hardline figure, Mahdi al-Mashat, in a transition that epitomized both the resilience and the political evolution of the group toward a more regionally oriented posture.

^[2] Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, Madeleine Wells, Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen. The Huthi Phenomenon, RAND, 2009.

Reshaping the Strategic Agenda

The new generation of Houthi leaders has two main characteristics. First, it focuses less on Sa'ada, the movement's heartland, or on local grievances. This generation of leaders "thinks big," aspiring to control the whole of Yemen and increase the Houthis' regional standing. The group has taken a direct role in governance, as evidenced by their de facto control over Sa'ada, the capital of Sana'a, and the rest of northwestern Yemen. Between 2013 and 2017, the Houthis co-opted and eventually absorbed the political bloc loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, tightening their grip on the economy in territories under their control, as well as state security and military institutions. This dynamic, in addition to the Al-Houthi family's marriage policy, helps explain how the group has penetrated and gained support from northern tribes. As a ruling authority, the Houthis have **established** many new organizations and structures, which have led to the institutionalization of Abdelmalek's guidance, resulting in a more articulated and centralized leadership.

The current generation of Houthi leaders has also cultivated tighter relations with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and its armed allies in the Axis of Resistance. For Hussein al-Houthi – who studied in Iran – and his generation, *Khomeinism* was a source of inspiration given its revolutionary nature and anti-imperialist rhetoric. For Abdelmalek, Iran represents a strategic partner in achieving the group's political and military goals in Yemen and in the regional struggle against Israel and the US. The Houthis' goals have evolved since the beginning of the war in 2015, and the regional dimension has now acquired a central role in the movement's strategy, as evidenced by its attacks in the Red Sea and against Israel.

A Comprehensive Policy

Given the Houthis' organizational structure, demonstrated adaptability, and closer alignment with Iran, the elimination of top leaders would likely impact the Houthis less than it has other armed groups in the region in terms of political and strategic determination. A source from the group recently told the media that "we are essentially proceeding with **extreme caution**, but at the same time, we are highly prepared to make sacrifices and cannot back down."

This should raise alarm bells in Washington. Airstrikes alone are unlikely to cow the group. Rather, any military action should be framed within a comprehensive political strategy for the country that partners with Yemeni, Gulf, and international allies. Shortcuts and easy solutions, such as eliminating the Houthi leadership, are unlikely to produce game-changing results, as the group's history has shown so far.

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