

Bios: The Houthi Delegates to Riyadh



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By: Adnan al-Jabrani

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Cover photo: Saudi Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman meets delegates from the Houthi group (Ansar Allah) in Riyadh on September 19, 2023 // Photo credit: Saudi Defense Minister's X account (formerly Twitter)



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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.

A Houthi delegation flew to Saudi Arabia's capital, Riyadh, on September 14 for the latest round of negotiations to end nine years of war in Yemen. A year after the United Nations officially brokered a truce in April 2022, talks have slowly shifted from backchannels to direct public meetings. The high visibility of their first-ever confirmed visit to Saudi Arabia reveals new information about the insular Houthi group (Ansar Allah). Moreover, a comparison of the latest Houthi delegation to the members who participated in consultations from 2018 through 2022 shows the extent of the group's transformation.

Overall, diversity has declined. In previous years, the Houthis included representatives from the General People's Congress (GPC) and other independent political parties that the Houthis acknowledged as allies. The selection of envoys was also regionally balanced, with representatives from governorates far from the main Houthi strongholds in northern Yemen. This time, the symbolic inclusion of other groups, regions, or allies was limited to one man —Jalal al-Ruwaishan — who is ostensibly affiliated with the GPC, although many believe he is now aligned with Houthi interests more than any political group. The erasure of these token representatives makes it clear that decision-making authority was always, and continues to be, with the Al-Houthi family. This can be seen in the backgrounds of the members of the Houthi negotiation delegation that traveled from Yemen to Riyadh. Biographical information was compiled through open-source material as well as interviews with officials close to the Houthi group as well as some members of the delegation.

Mohammed Abdelsalam – Chief Houthi Negotiator and Head of Delegation

Mohammed Abdelsalam Salah Falitah was born in 1982 in western Sa'ada. He received a religious education from his father, Zaidi scholar Salah Ahmad Falitah, and was a student at summer camps run by the Believing Youth, a Zaidi revivalist movement founded by Hussein al-Houthi. There, Abdelsalem studied alongside current Houthi group leader, Abdelmalek al-Houthi. At an early age, Abdelsalam often accompanied his father on travels abroad, as his father was active in trade and interested in mobilizing support for Zaidism in Yemen. Salah Falitah met former Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the 1980s, which helped shape Abdelsalam's political and theological outlook. This, combined with his father's Zaidi teachings, complemented his intensive studies abroad in fields relating to media and technology. Using this technical background and his close relationship with the Al-Houthi family, Abdelsalam began to regularly broadcast Hussein al-Houthi's lectures on the internet before the 1st Sa'ada War in 2004. Following Abdelmalek al-Houthi's takeover over the group's leadership after the 3rd Sa'ada War, Abdelsalam became the Houthi group's formal media officer in Abdelmalek al-Houthi's office, contacting newspapers and television channels during the 5th and 6th Sa'ada Wars.

He remained relatively **anonymous**, known only by his nom de guerre Mohammed Abdelsalam which obscured his family lineage until 2009, when Yemeni security services were able to identify Abdelsalam as the son of Salah Falitah and started to monitor him. He survived a **Saudi airstrike** during the 6th Sa'ada War in 2009 and had his first televised appearance as the official Houthi spokesman in 2012 when he launched Al-Masirah network, now the Houthis' primary media outlet – of which Abdelsalam still remains the chairman. In 2013, Abdelsalam **traveled** to Iraq during the war with the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL) and was accompanied by the former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani. This kindled a relationship between the two that helped grow Abdelsalam's network and reach as a negotiator, eventually leading to Soleimani **arranging** a meeting between Abdelsalam and Saudi officials in 2016. Abdelsalam continued in his role as Houthi media spokesperson and refrained from political activities until 2014. Abdelsalam's first public political activity was as a member of a delegation visiting Iran in March 2015, along with former President of the Supreme Political Council Saleh al-Sammad, immediately preceding Operation Decisive Storm and the beginning of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. Abdelsalam's presence on the trip was a sign of his close relationship with the Iranians.

Following the Saudi-led coalition intervention in Yemen, Abdelsalam was not a member of the Houthi negotiating team in the first round of UN-coordinated talks in Geneva in June 2015. Instead, he first appeared as the leader of the Houthi delegation in the second Geneva talks at the end of 2015, accompanied by the current President of the Supreme Political Council Mahdi al-Mashat and Hamza al-Houthi, a member of the council. Abdelsalam was chosen as the chief representative because Al-Sammad's role as President of the Supreme Political Council prevented him from leaving the capital, while Al-Mashat's strong personality in the previous round of Geneva talks, as well as during the 2013-14 National Dialogue Conference, had led to disputes within the Houthi political establishment.

Abdelsalam continues to serve as the head of the delegation today in addition to acting as political assistant to Abdelmalek al-Houthi, specifically on foreign affairs. Abdelsalam has proven his usefulness not only through an intimate understanding of the Iranian role in the region, but also through a keen ability to understand his audience. Interviews with Saudi media have **portrayed** a man who is diplomatic and eager to engage, while conversations with Iranian outlets reflect a desire to draw Yemen into a closer relationship with the members of the Axis of Resistance.

Hasan al-Kohlani – Head of the Houthi Foreign Operations Department of the Security and Intelligence Service

Hasan Ahmed al-Kohlani, also known as Abu Shaheed, was born in 1984 in Hajjah governorate. Throughout his childhood, Al-Kohlani's Hashemite family lived in both Sa'ada and Sana'a. The most recent talks in Riyadh were Al-Kohlani's first appearance in a Houthi negotiating delegation, having previously kept a low profile within the group. Al-Kohlani reportedly joined the Houthis early in his life and was part of a cell in Sana'a that carried out bombings and assassinations following the killing of Hussein al-Houthi in late 2004. He was later tried by the Public Prosecution Court, alongside senior military commander Abu Ali al-Hakim and other Houthi leaders in what was to become the Houthi security apparatus. Al-Kohlani was also among the first Houthi supervisors assigned to **oversee** Sana'a airport after the group's coup d'état in September 2014. At that time, he was reportedly the Houthi commander who gave the call to stop American charter flights from taking off from Sana'a airport under the pretext that they must be searched before departure. His father was **assassinated** in October 2014 by unidentified assailants on a motorcycle in Sana'a.

Al-Kohlani currently serves as the head of the Foreign Operations Department of the Security and Intelligence Service under Houthi control. The Undersecretary of Houthi Intelligence for Foreign Operations and Al-Kohlani's supervisor, Abdelwahid Abou Raas, previously served as a delegate to the National Dialogue Conference on behalf of the Houthis, and has political as well as security experience. Abou Raas' exclusion from the most recent delegation may indicate the extent of the **existing tensions** between the group and the leader of the GPC in Sana'a, Sadiq Amin Abou Raas – Abdelwahid's relative. Al-Kohlani's selection for the most recent delegation was due largely to his skill as a negotiator and connections to Iran's IRGC, potentially serving as a trusted link to Tehran if talks develop and move to an advanced stage.

Abdelmalek al-Ejri – Deputy Chief Negotiator

Abdelmalek al-Ejri was born in Haydan, Sa'ada governorate, where his Hashemite family had close ties with the Al-Houthi family. Al-Ejri first supported the Houthis during the Sa'ada Wars from 2004 to 2010 as a blogger who gained prominence on several online forums by promoting Houthi ideology in a style that combined Zaidi thought, Iranian Khomeinist influences, and leftist anti-imperialist rhetoric. Al-Ejri also published a collection of personal writings and research that applied a modernist and humanistic lens to the group's most extreme ideas, including the idea of Wilayah (divine right to rule), Al-Sayyid Al-Alam (the infallibility of the leader), and "political Hashemitism," the belief that the Hashemites' historical lineage entitles them to certain advantages and considers the right to rule over Muslims exclusive to Hashemite families. Al-Ejri's Hashemite background combined with his deep faith and devotion to Houthi dogma helped him into the group's upper echelons

Prior to 2014, Al-Ejri was the director of the Al-Fajr Center, an academic center affiliated with the Houthis that was later renamed the Yemeni Center for Political and Consulting Studies. After 2014 he served as a member of the Supreme Political Council, where he had nominal exposure to the Houthi group's top leadership. This changed in August 2016 when the Yemeni Center's magazine, Muqarabat, interviewed Abdelmalek al-Houthi and gave Al-Ejri a chance to associate more personally with the Houthi leader. After the two connected, Al-Ejri was brought into Abdelmalek's inner circle and eventually joined the Houthi negotiating delegation in the 2018 Stockholm consultations as a replacement for Mahdi al-Mashat after he was promoted to President of the Supreme Political Council.

Al-Ejri currently serves as Mohammed Abdelsalam's deputy; Abdelmalek reportedly paired the two to balance personalities in the group and ensure that sensitive issues, such as external negotiations and foreign affairs, were at least partially controlled by a Hashemite. Abdelsalam comes from a traditional Zaidi scholarly background and uses this traditional rhetoric to confront those he negotiates with. Al-Ejri brings a different skillset, a savvy intellectual spin that is more comprehensible to foreign delegations and researchers, making him more fluent in the language Houthis prefer to use with researchers, journalists, and politicians.

Jalal al-Ruwaishan – Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Affairs

Jalal Ali al-Ruwaishan was born in Khawlan, Sana'a governorate, in 1964. He joined the security services after graduating from the Police Academy, rising to the position of Security Director in Marib in the 1990s. In 2014, former President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi appointed Al-Ruwaishan as head of the Political Security Organization, the country's primary intelligence agency responsible for internal security. In the short-lived cabinet of Khaled Bahah, which governed from November 2014 to January 2015 after the Houthi takeover of Sana'a, Al-Ruwaishan served as the Minister of Interior, again, personally appointed by President Hadi. Politically, he is considered to be affiliated with the late Ali Abdullah Saleh and the GPC, despite not being an active member of the party. He continued to serve as Minister of Interior under the Houthi administration and was selected as a member of the newly formed Supreme Security Committee. Al-Ruwaishan's career shifted dramatically in October 2016 when a Saudi-led coalition airstrike hit the funeral hall where his father's wake was being held, killing dozens of senior security officials, political leaders, and tribal sheikhs. Al-Ruwaishan lost many important contacts within his political network during the airstrike, which led him to lean more into his Houthi connections.

In recent years, Al-Ruwaishan has been favored by Abdelmalek al-Houthi. He currently serves as Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Affairs, a ceremonial position with no direct function. Recently, Al-Ruwaishan has publicly adopted Houthi positions, where previously he had been more reserved. A source close to Al-Ruwaishan in Sana'a suggests he has strengthened his relationship with the Houthis by pledging allegiance to Abdelmalek. The Houthis consider Al-Ruwaishan's presence on the delegation a symbolic representation of the GPC's inclusion in government and support for the Houthi leadership.

Yahya al-Razami – Head of the Houthi Military Negotiating Committee

Yahya Abdullah Aydhah al-Razami was born in 1989 in Al-Safraa district, Sa'ada. His father was one of Hussein al-Houthi's closest associates, and Al-Razami's tribe famously defended the Houthi founder during the 1st Sa'ada War in 2004. Abdullah al-Razami, Yahya's father, was a commander in the 2nd Sa'ada War alongside senior Houthi military commander Yusuf al-Madani, gaining local influence and power. However, attachment to Hussein al-Houthi and reluctant acceptance of Abdelmalek al-Houthi's leadership after the former's death in September 2004 led to Al-Razami's demotion until 2015, when he rose back to power as he joined the fight against the government and the Saudi-led coalition.

Between 2007 and 2015, Abdullah al-Razami controlled a group of fighters, recruited via familial ties and financially backed using his personal wealth. At the beginning of the current war, he transferred command of these forces to his son, naming the militia the "Hamdan bin Zaid Axis." Yahya al-Razami participated in battles on the border with Saudi Arabia, continuing to grow the Hamdan bin Zaid Axis as a semi-independent force operating alongside the Houthis and their Jihadi Council. Al-Razami rejoined the Houthi inner circle when his forces **repelled** Ali Abdullah Saleh's attempted uprising in December 2017. Al-Mashat held **separate meetings** with Yahya al-Razami to discuss military developments outside of the Ministry of Defense, upsetting Houthi military commanders who saw Al-Razami as dangerously independent and a threat to their power.

From 2019, Yahya al-Razami's power quickly grew. He used his prestige as a military leader to establish his own separate judicial system – which he heads – to resolve tribal problems in Sana'a, and also established his own **media arm** that conducts and publishes interviews on X and Telegram. According to sources close to Houthi leadership, Abdelmalek remains wary of Al-Razami's growing power, and has appointed Al-Razami to several prestigious positions which require time-consuming meetings and public appearances, but involve few real responsibilities, in an attempt to contain him. For example, in May 2022, Abdelmalek appointed Al-Razami to head the Houthi Military Committee, while the real decision-making

power remained with Hussein Dhaifallah, a member of Houthi intelligence services and the Jihadi Council. Abdelmalek al-Houthi also selected Al-Razami to head the delegation of Houthi pilgrims who were allowed to perform Hajj for the first time this year, a symbolic role far from military influence. Al-Razami has many supporters and opponents in the group, explaining Abdelmalek al-Houthi's decision to keep him close but toothless as an attempt to draw Al-Razami's followers into the group. His honorific appointments are also an attempt to appeal to tribes in Sa'ada who are allied with the Houthis, as both junior and senior Al-Razamis present themselves as model tribesmen who support and are loyal to Ahl Al-Bayt (the family of the Prophet Mohammed) and are rewarded in return.

Hussein al-Ezzi – Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs

Hussein Hamoud al-Ezzi was born to a Hashemite family in Al-Jawf. He joined the Houthi group early in his life before he left Yemen for university in Jordan. His father was one of the most prominent Sayyid monarchists, who collected salaries from the Saudi government that then were distributed to pro-Imamate families in the five years after the Republic Revolution on September 26, 1962, as Saudi Arabia supported allies of the overthrown Imam during the North Yemen Civil War. Hussein al-Ezzi rose to power in the Houthi group in 2014 while working as a political relations officer for the group. He publicly represented the Houthis in the signing of the Peace and National Partnership Agreement after the 2014 coup and was also a prominent political commentator who represented the group on social media. In 2018, Al-Ezzi was appointed the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and became responsible for communicating with all official delegations that visit Sana'a, carrying out the formal protocols under the Houthi group's authority.

Adnan al-Jabarni is a Yemeni journalist specializing in military affairs. He previously worked for Al-Masdar Online and has covered the conflict in Yemen since 2014, writing investigative reports focused on the internal structure of the Houthis and various military components in Yemen.

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