

# **The Israel-Iran War – Reaction from Sana'a Center Experts**

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June 20, 2025

**Cover photo:** Israel's attacks on parts of Tehran at dawn on Friday, June 13, 2025 // Photo by Mehr News Agency, CC BY 4.0.



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.

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The Middle East is undergoing profound shifts following the Israeli strikes on Iran. These developments have far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the Islamic Republic, particularly influencing the situation in Yemen. The Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*) has emerged as the last effective stronghold of the so-called Axis of Resistance, especially after the weakening of its other pillars, most notably Hezbollah. Although the Houthis were quick to condemn Israel's attack on Iran, the extent of their ability to support their allies **beyond rhetoric** remains uncertain. The Houthis announced the firing of **ballistic missiles** at Israel on June 15, with military spokesman Yahya Sarea stating that the group's attacks were coordinated with Iran. However, a week into this escalation, Iran appears to be largely fighting back on its own, and Houthi discourse for the time being is primarily focused on the Palestinians in Gaza.

The current escalation could have consequences for all actors in Yemen, not only for the Houthis but also for the anti-Houthi camp. A weakened Iranian regime, and by extension a weakened Houthi movement, may present a strategic opportunity to shift the balance of power. However, with Israel and the Houthis trading attacks for months, fears that Yemen may become further embroiled in regional war and potential expansion of Israeli military operations in Yemen raise serious concerns about the impact on a population already stretched to its limits.

Sana'a Center experts Maged al-Madhaji, Abdulghani al-Iryani, Tawfeek al-Ganad, and Osamah al-Rawhani react to the latest developments and consider what the current escalation might mean for Yemen.



**Maged al-Madhaji**

*“Other factions within the anti-Houthi camp appear eager to seize the moment, but remain bound by Riyadh’s reluctance to be dragged into military escalation to satisfy Israeli or American imperatives.”*

The repercussions of the current escalation carry immense weight for the Houthis, particularly for their leader, Abdelmalek al-Houthi, who has combined remarkable pragmatism in adapting to changing circumstances while demonstrating profound belief in his “divine mandate” and an unshakable confidence in his movement. While a defeated or significantly weakened Iran would represent a severe strategic burden for Abdelmalek, it would also present an exceptional opportunity to redefine his position, not merely as the successor of the late Hassan Nasrallah, but as a symbolic and operational substitute for Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Abdelmalek could become a figure to rally behind for those looking for a leader to oppose Western influence. But such an ambitious reorientation depends on the group’s ability to survive the upcoming confrontation relatively intact.

The loss of Iranian military supplies, particularly missiles and drones, would present a serious challenge for the Houthis, as these capabilities underpin their strategic advantage and regional deterrent power. As this support diminishes, the group will likely become more sensitive to its own resource constraints, potentially prompting it to seek alternative partnerships, especially with China and Russia. The Houthis could also increase their political and security relationships with non-state actors and smuggling networks, especially along the East African coast, to secure alternative paths of influence.

The Houthi leadership is also likely to feel increased anxiety about becoming the next target in an escalating conflict. This situation presents two options: the group could launch a preemptive offensive against their domestic rivals, or they could choose to make concessions and negotiate a new peace agreement that affords them less generous provisions than those outlined in the current Saudi roadmap.

Other factions within the anti-Houthi camp appear eager to seize the moment, but remain bound by Riyadh’s reluctance to be dragged into military escalation to satisfy Israeli or American imperatives. Saudi Arabia insists that any action must align with its strategic interests, not those of its local allies or Western capitals – Washington foremost among them. For its part, the UAE views the situation as a chance to advance its coastal campaign, while Muscat is working to open a new channel for de-escalation to shield Sana’a and deliver a political solution.

Coupled with domestic inertia, this regional divergence will likely exacerbate internal divisions within the anti-Houthi camp. This tension will be further fueled by growing frustration with Riyadh, which continues to operate at its own pace with little regard for its partners’ interests or mounting Western pressure.

The persistent rivalries and competition within the anti-Houthi bloc dampen any realistic prospects for a direct confrontation with the Houthis, absent substantial foreign assistance. Conversely, the Houthis face mounting economic and security constraints, exacerbated by airstrikes, sanctions, and the apparent onset of targeted assassinations. This combination imposes immense pressure and severely hampers their capabilities. The net result in Yemen is a dangerous standoff: both sides are watching each other warily, unable to break the deadlock.





**Abdulghani al-Iryani**

*“Ultimately, the more scenarios change, the more they stay the same.”*

The conflict between Iran and Israel is heating up, with potentially catastrophic results for the Middle East. While it is difficult to make a forecast for the entire region, the impact on Yemen is relatively predictable. The two most likely scenarios are a negotiated end to the Israel-Iran conflict that meets the US's objective of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, or a resounding defeat for Iran and a mortal blow to its Axis of Resistance network.

Should Iran come out of this conflict weakened but not totally defeated, their Houthi allies will continue to benefit from Iranian diplomatic support and covert material backing, primarily in the form of arms shipments. Domestically, the military power imbalance between the Houthis and the internationally recognized government will remain the greatest obstacle to a balanced and durable peace in Yemen. Not only do the Houthis enjoy an advantage in men under arms, but they have also acquired most of the arsenal of the pre-war army and control the state institutions that extract public revenues. In the absence of a miraculous improvement in the management and makeup of the internationally recognized government, the Houthis will likely hold the upper hand in any peace talks.

If, on the other hand, Iran and its other Axis proxies are dealt a fatal blow, the Houthis may still come out of the conflict with limited losses. The group does not rely entirely on Iranian support and, unlike Lebanon's Hezbollah, has reliable sources of domestic revenue. In such a scenario, the Houthis will emerge with only one significant loss: to escape further punishment, they will, in all likelihood, be forced to give up their missile program and stockpiles. Such a move would reduce their ability to threaten Red Sea shipping and Saudi and Emirati targets. But the group's military advantage over the Yemeni government would be little affected.

Ever since October 7, Saudi Arabia and the US have acknowledged that the Houthis cannot be defeated without boots on the ground, and have explored the potential of domestic anti-Houthi forces to play that role. They were not convinced. Nothing has changed in this respect, nor is it likely to. The government has not been able to establish a unified command. The divisions between the armed components of the pro-government forces are deep, and squabbling, corruption, and institutional weakness have not abated. Saudi Arabia will likely resume its efforts to goad the Houthis into making a deal, at the expense of the government and its constituent armed components. Ultimately, the more scenarios change, the more they stay the same.



**Tawfeek al-Ganad**

***“The anger at Iran stems not from support for Israel but rather from deep resentment of Iran’s destructive footprint in Yemen.”***

May God destroy the oppressors by the hands of other oppressors. This phrase — a prayer for mutual destruction — captures the prevailing public sentiment in Yemen, reflecting a general hostility toward both Iran and Israel, with only a few exceptions.

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that a long-standing belief in the Yemeni collective consciousness - that Israel is the ultimate enemy - has partly, though not entirely, eroded. Opponents of the Houthis still find it difficult to express support for Israel when its planes bomb Houthi-controlled areas, or even when it targets Iran itself. Many Houthi critics have been quick to condemn the attacks on Tehran, even though it has been a principal adversary for the past decade in its role as the Houthis’ primary backer. This ambivalence is especially evident among Islamists, who applauded Houthi attacks on Israel so long as they were carried out under the banner of the Palestinian cause and in support of Gaza.

A closer look at public discourse, whether through street-level conversations or social media posts, reveals a spectrum of attitudes across the zones of control. Within Houthi-held areas, many refrain from explicitly siding with Iran, but nevertheless relay news of its strikes against Israel. Some go further, expressing sympathy for Tehran and praising its leaders and their “struggle” – these are most often diehard Houthi loyalists. Yet there is a sense of *schadenfreude* among the broader public, with whispers of Iran’s rapid weakening and vulnerability, despite its self-styled image as a formidable regional power. Voicing an anti-Iran stance carries risk, making it difficult to distinguish private sentiments from the public line residents must maintain.

In territories under the control of the internationally recognized government, the prevailing attitude is overwhelmingly critical of Tehran, often laced with sarcasm and relish at its misfortune. This is usually accompanied by reminders of Iran’s meddling in Yemen and its role in enabling Houthi violence. But there is rarely outright alignment with Tel Aviv. The anger at Iran stems not from support for Israel but rather from deep resentment of Iran’s destructive footprint in Yemen. Openly proclaiming support for Israel remains socially dangerous, especially in the post-October 7 world, potentially inviting backlash even in close social circles.

Yemenis living abroad enjoy greater freedom to articulate their positions, which are largely anti-Iran and, for some vocal Yemeni analysts, even tinged with sympathy for Israel and the US. This tendency is unsurprising given that many left Yemen to flee Houthi rule and see Tehran as an architect of their exodus. But in the days following the outbreak of hostilities, a wave of online posts has attempted to root public opinion in Islamic mores and the religious principle of *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* (loyalty and disavowal). Others have contested this framework, arguing that politics should not be bound up with religious edicts but rather reflect popular sentiment and perceived national interest. The Houthis have explicitly leveraged religious framing to bolster their pro-Tehran, anti-Israel stance, and certain religious figures within the pro-government camp have similarly pronounced religious justifications for their views. Whether these debates are organic or deliberately orchestrated to sway public opinion remains unclear.



**Osamah al-Rawhani**

*“Muscat is now applying noticeable pressure on the Houthis and is no longer a regional ally with few demands and no expectations.”*

While the threat of an Israel-Iran war has been a global concern for some time, it is now a reality. Events are quickly shaping a new future for the region, perhaps most directly for Yemen. The conflict in Yemen, which started with the 2014 Houthi takeover of Sana'a, has been inextricably linked to Iran, which for years has served as the group's leading supporter and strategic partner. Simply put, Iranian involvement has been the deciding factor in the Houthis' gains and expansion. However, that is not to say that the Houthis are Iranian proxies. Rather, their respective interests are permanently bound together, and their alliance and reliance on one another remain strong and resilient.

If Iran is significantly weakened or defeated in the current conflict, the Houthis will likely lose the support they have received from Tehran. Without the Islamic Republic, the Houthis' list of friends would primarily be limited to Oman, as a cautiously supportive regional ally. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia remains primarily concerned about the group's increasing recklessness.

Following the US air campaign, the Houthis have begun to feel pressure from Oman, marking a departure from nearly a decade of tacit support. When the Houthis escalated their attacks on Red Sea shipping and Omanis started to reconsider the repercussions of their perceived affiliation with the Houthis, they felt compelled to recalibrate their position in response to shifting regional and international dynamics. Muscat is now applying noticeable pressure on the Houthis and is no longer a regional ally, with few demands and no expectations. Oman's diplomatic efforts are behind the Houthis' truce with the US, following Operation Rough Rider, and the release of numerous detainees by the Houthis this year.

At the same time, Iran — the Houthis' main regional ally — is being attacked and humiliated. Left with few options, the Houthis continue to signal their support by attacking Israel, but these actions are neither new nor strategically significant. In reality, the Houthis are under more strain than ever — partly because their key ally is being weakened, and partly because they recognize that they could be next in line. While the Houthis may avoid targeting US assets for now, any direct American involvement alongside Israel could collapse their fragile truce with Washington—inviting a new wave of retaliatory strikes and further isolating them regionally and internationally.

Neutralizing Iranian support for the Houthis will incentivize regional actors to continue backing the anti-Houthi camp and encourage local, regional, and international cooperation to end Houthi control. But if Iran is not defeated in this conflict — or if its support of the Houthis is not neutralized as part of a broader deal—Yemen's situation is likely to remain unchanged for the foreseeable future.

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*This analysis 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. Any views expressed within should not be construed as representing the Sana'a Center or the Dutch government.*



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