

Houthis: A Profile Analysis

- 1. Identity and Objectives of the Houthis:** The Houthis, formally known as Ansar Allah (“Supporters of God”), have evolved from a local religious and political movement in Northern Yemen into one of the most consequential non-state actors in the Middle East. The Houthi Movement is a Zaydi Shia political and armed movement that originated from northern Saada province of Yemen in the 1990s. The movement was named after the Houthi family, particularly Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, who emerged as an important religious and political figure in the 1990s; and later, adopted the name “Ansar Allah”. The roots of the Houthi Movement lie in the political and religious metamorphosis of Yemen during the 1980s and 1990s. Initially, the movement developed around opposition to corruption, political marginalization, threats to identity and foreign influence under Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. However, the movement’s objectives have changed over time. Primarily, the Houthis seek political dominance and substantial autonomy within Yemen’s political order, while portraying itself as a defender of Yemeni sovereignty against foreign intervention. The Houthis aspire to retain their power position in northern Yemen and exert influence over Yemen as a whole. It has historically opposed Saudi Arabia and U.S. influence in the Middle East and strongly rejected Israel; and now, it aims for regional influence, political control and ideological recognition. It aims to enhance its regional standing through the annexation of critical geographical chokepoints, like Bab-el-Mandeb and illustrating themselves as part of wider “Axis of Resistance”, confronting Israel and its alliances.



Source: ABC News

- 2. History and Rise of the Houthi Movement:** The September 11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. led “War on Terror” intensified the tensions between the Houthis and the western backed Saleh government. Between 2004 and 2010, six rounds of fighting took place between the Houthis and the Yemeni government. In 2004, Hussein al-Houthi was killed, and since then, the movement has been surviving under the leadership of his family, especially his brother, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. Moreover, a major opening for the Houthi activities was propagated through the 2011 Arab Spring uprising, after which President Saleh eventually left the office. However, the political transition failed to resolve the structural problems of Yemen, and consequently, the Houthis gained an opportunity to expand their military and political influence in Yemen; and seized Sana, the capital of Yemen in September 2014, prompting a Saudi-led military intervention that ultimately cascaded into a civil war in Yemen. The 2014-15 expansion transformed the Houthis from a northern insurgency to a national power contender. In March 2015, the Saudi government launched a military intervention against the Houthis that resulted in Saudi-Iran competition and extensive humanitarian suffering, even though the Houthis survived the military campaigns and comprehensive political settlement remained unachieved.
- 3. Difference with State Actors:** Gradually, the Houthis have exhibited a governing structure in territories under their control which includes administrative institutions and security bodies. This has provided them with the scope to function simultaneously as a political organization, insurgent movement and de facto governing authority, which explains their predominant source of resilience. Notwithstanding, the Houthis exercise many state like functions and de facto authority in a large part of Yemen, but the most important distinction that separates them from a legitimate state actor is international recognition. In the territories they hold control, functions like- administration, taxation, political mobilization and security provisions are performed by them; nevertheless, they do not enjoy the features- internationally recognized sovereignty, formal institutions, monopoly over legitimate force and established diplomatic relations- possessed by conventional and legitimate states. Nevertheless, after the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 and the subsequent Gaza war, the movement gained new momentum. The Houthis started attacking the military and commercial ships in and around the Red Sea, claiming that their actions were intended to pressure Israel over Gaza. This ultimately internationalized the Yemen conflict and brought United States, the Saudi Arabia and other international actors into direct confrontation with the movement.
- 4. Command Structure of the Houthi Movement:** The Houthi command structure is a highly centralized but layered political-military system. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, considered the apex leader of the Houthis, possesses the movement’s supreme political, ideological and strategic authority. The Jihad Council serves as the military and security decision-making body, while coordinating and mobilizing operations, regions and forces. Specialized forces and local supervisors function as links between the leaders and fighters. Although the movement is heavily supported by Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, the core command of the Houthi actions operates from Houthi-controlled Yemen, especially Sanaa. The system combines centralized strategic decision making with decentralized implementation, while relying heavily on family, tribal and long-

standing personal loyalties; allowing local commanders considerable operational flexibility while major strategic decisions remain concentrated around the senior leadership. This command structure has enabled the movement to stand strong despite its leadership losses without the organization being dismantled.

5. **External Patronization:** Although the movement holds its own Yemeni social, political and ideological roots; however, its strategic relationship with Iran has increasingly become significant over the period. Iran being the most important external partner of the Houthis, Tehran has been allegedly providing distinct forms of military, political, technological and financial support to the movement. This relationship forms part of Iran's broader regional network of aligned non-state actors, commonly referred to as the "Axis of Resistance". However, Tehran has officially denied direct operational ties with the movement and has disputed accusations concerning military assistance. Allegedly, the Houthis also maintain diplomatic and logistical relationship with Russia and North Korea which supports them with varying degrees of assistance, mainly to challenge western maritime interests in the Red Sea corridor. Among non-state actors, the Houthis hold down concrete ties with Hezbollah and Hamas, where the former works as a role model, patroniser, arms provider and mentor since the early 2000s, and the latter holds strong political and ideological alignment with the Houthis.



Source: Artificial Intelligence

6. **Present Condition:** At present, the Houthis stand as a major power in Yemen, and continue to control Sana and substantial parts of northern and western Yemen; whereas, the internationally recognized government, Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) exerts its authority primarily in areas outside Houthi control. In 2026, the Houthi activities have become closely connected to confrontation involving Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States of America. The Houthis recently captured the strategic

Red Sea Port city of Mokha, Perim Island and two nearby islands in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to tighten their grip on a crucial international shipping gateway. They are also eyeing on strategic and government-held provinces Marib and Taiz; the former being a major stronghold of government in northern Yemen containing critical oil and gas infrastructures, while the latter serves as an exigent link between the north and the southern coastal regions, making it extremely important for military control and supply lines.

7. **Geopolitical Significance:** Houthis now exclusively control the surrounding territories of Bab el-Mandeb, one of the world's most significant maritime chokepoints connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean. In recent times, the group declared a blockade on Saudi shipping, and launched missile and drone attacks targeting tankers and regional waterways, raising global oil prices. Voyage times and transportation costs have also been increased as shipping companies have diverted vessels away from the Red Sea. On September 15, 2026, a Houthi-deployed drone just outside the Mecca was intercepted and destroyed by the Saudi air defences; even though, the Houthis completely denied the allegations. The Houthis represent a direct security challenge for Saudi Arabia along its southern frontier. For the western powers and the United States, Houthi activities threaten the freedom of navigation, and the protection of international trade and commerce. All these challenges and disruptions in international arena induced by the Houthis have made them strategically a very influential actor in global economic, geopolitical and energy security calculations.