

# The Regional Rise of Houthis after Nasrallah's Assassination

Geopolitics  
Strategy Unit  
October 2024



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## Introduction:

The Middle East is on the verge of a regional war escalation, with Israel ramping up its operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran retaliating against Israel following the assassinations of key figures in Tehran and Beirut.

In the aftermath of these events, the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen rushed to demonstrate their significance as key players in the complex conflicts of the Middle East, shifting their focus from local concerns in Yemen to broader regional issues.

The assassination of Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, has created a leadership vacuum within the "resistance axis," presenting an opportunity for the Houthis to enhance their role. This change in leadership has the potential to alter the region's political dynamics significantly.

During the conflict, the Houthis have effectively positioned themselves as important players within the Iranian axis, significantly improving their military capabilities. Western intelligence on their forces and movements remains limited, complicating a comprehensive assessment of their power.

Iran now seeks a successor for Hassan Nasrallah, and the Houthis are presenting their leader as a suitable replacement. Their confidence is bolstered by their achievements in the Red Sea, their expertise in Yemen's complex terrain, especially in missile and drone warfare, and their control over smuggling routes for weapons from Iran. The scattered islands in the region have been transformed into significant arsenals and strategic positions in the Red Sea conflict. Additionally, their growing ties with Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria, and the potential expansion of their foreign relations by engaging with Russia and China amid regional and international alignments.

This paper discusses the opportunity for the Houthis to rise regionally to lead the Iranian axis instead of Hezbollah, which has been weakened and dismantled, and examines the implications of this shift for the dynamic changes in the Middle East conflict.

## Dominance and Cross-Border Ambition:

Since the days following Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the Houthis have demonstrated their ability to leverage geography to assert dominance and disrupt global trade. Their success is evident as the Red Sea route, a vital artery accounting for 10% of global maritime trade, witnessed an unprecedented downturn. Ship transits in the Red Sea plummeted by 56% on an annual basis <sup>1</sup>. In a recent announcement, the Houthi leader disclosed the outcomes of their attacks in the Red Sea over the past year, which included targeting 193 ships, launching more than 1000 missiles and drones. These attacks led to the tragic loss of at least 4 sailors, the sinking of three vessels, and the hijacking of one.

Houthi attacks against Israel have been sporadic, with a peak in November 2023, featuring five attacks that month. Subsequently, the average direct attacks claimed by the Houthis on Israel were only three per month from December 2023 to August 2024, with 37% (10 out of 27 attacks) believed to originate from Iraq <sup>2</sup>.

The July attack on Tel Aviv with drones, resulting in killing an Israeli citizen, was particularly impactful, along with another ballistic missile landing 100 meters from the US Embassy in Tel Aviv. The Houthis continued their assaults on international shipping lanes and Israel during the initial year of the war, leveraging their capabilities as a violent group capable of mobilization, with a steady supply line of weapons and experts from Iran. Consequently, the group developed maritime attack tactics, intensifying the use of drones to target ships and employing movable missile launch pad near their targets. They also developed combined attack methods, involving missiles, drones, and remotely controlled suicide boats simultaneously, making it harder for ships to defend themselves.

The Houthis have consistently used tracking systems to monitor ship movements, enabling them in more precise target identification. They also focused efforts on documenting major operations to confirm their targets. Moreover, the Houthis give special attention to the psychological warfare, disseminating misleading information about their ability to target ships in the Mediterranean or damage part of the American aircraft carrier.

This created perception among shipping companies that they could be reached .This negatively impacted their international adversaries .This psychological aspect is crucial in a conflict where strategic victory matters more than tangible military gains.

Following these developments ,the Houthis established themselves as a significant force within the resistance axis ,forming alliances with other groups ,including Iraqi factions ,which they announced during the first half of the conflict .Their presence in Syria further reinforced their status as a reliable regional power.

Last year's events demonstrate the Houthis 'adaptability and decentralized structure amid changing battlefield conditions ,highlighting their ambition to become a regional power with broader influence on regional policies .The group views the current international dynamics and the emergence of a new bipolar world order as an opportunity to solidify their position as the dominant force in Yemen and a key player in regional politics .They aim to align themselves with Iran ,a regional powerhouse ,and Russia and China ,two major international powers on the U.N .Security Council ,both of which have interests in further engaging the United States in Middle Eastern affairs.

### **The International Failure to Determine the Houthis' Power:**

The United States and Western countries have deployed military assets in the region -without the participation of regional countries - to respond to Houthi attacks .Three military operations have been announced” :Guardian of Prosperity “in December 2023 led by the United States and other countries ,Poseidon Archer operation involving only the United States and Britain since January ,2024 ,12 targeting weapons depots and launch sites on Houthis 'control areas ,resulting in 82 deaths and 340 injuries according to Houthi sources ,3 and the” ASPIDES “operation ,led by the European Union ,starting its mission in February ,focusing on protecting ships from maritime attacks.

Israel took unilateral action by launching attacks on the Hodeida governorate .The first in July targeted oil storage facilities in the Hodeida port .Subsequent attacks in September expanded to target oil facilities in both the Hodeida and Ras Isa ports ,as well as power stations .4 These Israeli attacks indicate a lack of trust by the Netanyahu government in American-British strikes on Houthi-controlled areas.

The Western strategy in the Red Sea ,which relied on” deterrence” “,destruction “,and” decimation “to weaken Houthi capabilities ,has failed .The strategy’s flaws were evident in the lack of involvement from key stakeholders) both local and international,( the fragmentation and weakness of the Western coalition ,underestimation of the Houthi threat ,and an absence of a coherent political and strategic approach.<sup>5</sup>

### **Leadership of the Iran Axis:**

Since Hamas’s attack on Israeli settlements on October ,2023 ,7 in a complex operation called” Aqsa Flood “,the Houthi group in Yemen has shifted from being a rebel group against the government to a power threatening regional and international security. They exploited Arab public sympathy for Gaza ,which had been subjected to Israeli genocide .The Houthis ’engagement in the regional conflicts has become a cornerstone of Iran’s interests in the region .The group utilized its internal wars in Yemen(2004-2023)to develop its military capabilities ,receiving unlimited Iranian support enabling them to acquire drones and missiles used in cross-border attacks.

Israel’s war on Gaza provided an opportunity for the Houthis to assert themselves as a regional power by targeting ships in the Red Sea and launching attacks on Israel .This solidified their presence in the” Resistance Axis “and positioned them as a significant member in Iran’s allied axis ,comprising armed groups in Lebanon ,Iraq ,Yemen ,and Syria ,all supported by Iran and claiming war against Israel and the United States.

Iran recognized early on the importance of exploiting the Houthis as an armed group on the southern border of Saudi Arabia .Tehran views the Houthis ’closure of the Red Sea against ships as a preliminary win for these investments ,a crucial part of their strategy ,which historically has been threats to close the Bab el Mandeb Strait.

For decades ,the Lebanese Hezbollah party and its secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah led the Resistance Axis in the Arab world .However ,after the significant blow the party suffered in the incident known as the” Pagars Attack “last September ,which neutralized thousands of party leaders and disrupted its communication system ,the party appeared penetrated .This situation made the top-tier and second-tier leadership of the party to being targeted ,opening up opportunities for Israelis to target Nasrallah and assassinate him along with top military and security leaders of the party.

With Nasrallah's assassination and the party's weakening, the Houthis and their leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi emerged as an expected replacement to lead the Iranian axis in the region, with ambitions to influence Middle Eastern policies in the future. The leadership of Hezbollah was the cornerstone of Iranian policies in the region, but it seems the Iranian map within the axis is undergoing radical changes.

### **The New Role of Houthis**

Over the past year, the Houthis have established a larger role for themselves within the "Axis of Resistance" supported by Iran, but they have not been able to surpass the significance of the Lebanese Hezbollah. The killing of Hassan Nasrallah and the weakening of the party created a significant vacuum within the axis. The party has long been Iran's closest ally and the core of Iran's "Forward Defense" strategy for decades. Hezbollah has been the centerpiece of this strategy with a huge arsenal of missiles, shells, and drones on the northern borders of Israeli occupation. They fought a war on behalf of the Syrian regime that lasted a decade and a half. Hezbollah has always been the primary link between Iran and most movements in the axis, providing training and armaments to groups in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. Even with a new leader for the party, the absence of Hassan Nasrallah, who had a distinct aura as a regional leader of the axis, makes Abdul-Malik al-Houthi see himself as an ideal replacement. He has focused entirely on embodying the persona of Hassan Nasrallah throughout his leadership of the movement.

With Hezbollah weakened by the current war, Iran will need to reassess the effectiveness of its "Forward Defense" strategy, which aimed to defend Iran outside its borders and prevent direct strikes or war, a goal that seems closer to reality today than it was before the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah. In the short term, Iran will likely need a substitute to rely on as the axis' central player until Hezbollah can restructure and avoid political collapse within Lebanon.

Therefore, Iran may turn to the Houthis in Yemen as an alternative to fill the role of Hezbollah within the axis. This decision is based on several advantages that the Houthis have over other resistance movements, such as:

**Willingness to achieve the Iranian project at any cost :** The Houthis have demonstrated their willingness to engage in armed actions without regard for international laws ,the international community ,or human rights ,in pursuit of Iranian objectives.

They have relied on their efficiency within the resistance axis to carry out complex missile operations and attacks against Gulf countries ,the United States ,Britain ,and Israel. With a large arsenal of weapons ,extensive training of their fighters ,and complete control over the areas they dominate ,the Houthis have proven their ability to adapt .Since ,2004 they have fought numerous wars ,evading repercussions through diplomacy that advances their war objectives.

**Lack of commitments :** The Houthis have a high tolerance for pain and are not afraid of escalation ,even to a world war .<sup>6</sup> This fearlessness gives them an advantage in regional conflicts that concern other countries .They also have no obligations toward the Yemenis in the areas they control—there are no operational expenses for their authority ,and the society under their control lives in poverty without salaries.

**Yemen's Geographical Location :** Iran's potential control over the Bab al-Mandeb Strait ,given that the Houthis control areas in the north and west of the country ,gives them the ability to disrupt global trade if they close the Red Sea .Underground tunnels give the group the ability to clandestinely build a weapons arsenal .Yemen's terrain presents significant challenges .Any ground offensive against the group would require complex tactics ,especially if local communities do not participate .Additionally ,airstrikes would face difficulties in decisively eliminating the Houthis ,as some of their bases are hidden in the mountains.

**Expanding Iran's Regional Influence :** The Houthis 'strategic partnership with militias in Iraq and some groups in Syria is an important element in their future activities in the region .Given their ties to Tehran ,there is a possibility that the Houthis will play a role in expanding Iran's regional influence and maintaining its control over existing militias.

**Iran's Threat Network :** During the past year of war ,it has become clear that Houthi-controlled areas have turned into an ideal location for Iran's threat network. From there ,attacks could be launched against Israel ,U.S .forces ,and Western powers in the region—attacks that the Iranian regime itself might not dare to carry out directly. Currently ,the Houthis have used the reputation of supersonic weapons as a tool to draw attention.



However, in the future, Yemen could serve as a perfect site for such weapons, given its geographical location and proven ability to hide launch sites within its rugged terrain<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, the Houthis' growing relationship with Iraq could increase the group's influence on Saudi Arabia's northern border and on U.S. bases there. In June, a senior Houthi military commander was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Iraq, alongside leaders of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias<sup>8</sup>.

These combined factors have enhanced the Houthis' power and effectiveness within the resistance axis, prompting Iran to consider them as a replacement for Hezbollah in the region. As an armed group pursuing religious goals tied to the Imamate in the Zaidi sect and crossing borders, alongside domestic political aims, the Houthis could play a larger role in the regional scene in the near future. However, in the medium and long term, Iran may consider alternatives to its current strategy, especially if Hezbollah struggles to rebuild itself<sup>9</sup>.

Among the available options is nuclear weapons production. By mid-2025, Iran could be capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium to power a single nuclear bomb within just a week or two. Tehran would then need several months, or more than a year, to assemble a warhead and integrate it into a delivery system, such as ballistic missiles.

### **The Impact of the Houthis' Rise on War Dynamics:**

The failure of Western powers to deter Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and the expectations of a larger role for the group in the Middle East will drive the Houthis towards options that will not only affect the Houthis but also change the dynamics of politics and security within the group, in Yemen, and across the region. Some of these effects include:

**Assassination Strategy:** Despite the Biden administration's opposition to carrying out attacks to assassinate Houthi leaders, current developments may prompt a change if Israel does not fulfill this role. Israeli and American officials often discuss the effectiveness of assassinations targeting Hezbollah leadership to curb the party's influence and disrupt its command and control. This could potentially lead American and Israeli forces to adopt a similar strategy in this context.

The Houthis have remained under less Western scrutiny due to their local focus, but the evolving situation in the Red Sea will, over time, affect global trade and serve as an inspiration for many insurgent movements. This may later evolve into a strategy that impacts other countries, causing regional decision-makers to fear that maritime attacks could inspire rebels and directly threaten their national security.

The assassination of Houthi leaders would create a leadership vacuum within the group, which differs significantly from Hezbollah. The impact on the movement would be far greater, as their ongoing war with the Yemenis has fuelled revenge that could spark internal conflict between the group and the Yemeni people. Theoretically, there is no immediate replacement for the Houthi leader, Abdul Malik al-Houthi.

**Yemen's Economy and Infrastructure:** Houthi attacks have already had an impact on the Yemeni economy, from increased insurance costs for shipping vessels heading to Yemeni ports to the suspicious relationship between the economy and the Houthis. The Biden administration's classification of the Houthis as a terrorist group, in particular, has made international relief organizations and commercial entities operating in Houthi-controlled areas more wary of potential ties to "terrorism," "hindering external cooperation and prompting them to scale back operations in Yemen. Israel conducted a dramatic attack on the port of Hodeida with a clear and significant trajectory, targeting the vital port responsible for 78% of Yemen's import needs. Israeli occupation noticeably expanded its attacks in the second round to include the port and new infrastructure targets, sending a message not only to Yemenis but to regional countries as well. Following the first campaign in July, Netanyahu stated that the Middle East should watch flames in Hodeida, warning the Houthis of larger attacks to come. After the initial attack on Hodeida, Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi announced the start of a new military phase against Israel dubbed "Fifth Stage" "vowing revenge, indicating a continuation of retaliatory strikes.

**Peace in Yemen:** The Houthi attacks have already hindered discussions about peace in Yemen. Americans and Western powers are seeking to enforce a ceasefire in the Red Sea as part of peace plans in Yemen, disrupting a vague roadmap led by the United Nations to end the war in Yemen. At the same time, the Houthis see the political leverage they've gained by turning the Red Sea into a bargaining chip, making the roadmap outdated. They are now looking for more gains to control the whole country and exclude their opponents from any future partnerships. The Houthis want to pressure the U.S. and the West into presenting an offer that would recognize them as the legitimate authority representing Yemen, alongside other considerations related to their local and regional image. The Houthis' concerns regarding assassination strategies and the potential loss of leadership and control, as happened with Hezbollah or a strong blow to Iran halting its support for the resistance axis, may push them towards negotiations. However, their current strategy remains focused on full control of Yemen and long-term influence on regional policies.

**Regional Security:** The Houthis and Iranians believe that Israel is increasingly reliant on American and European protection. They see Western presence in the Red Sea and the region's response as weaker than expected, understanding this as a sign of the aging influence of the U.S. and its allies in the region. This presents an opportunity for them to expand their influence in the area.

The Houthis' display of Iranian weapons in the Red Sea and against Israel was notable, sending a message to regional countries about their ability to target their security and economy. This encourages Iran to keep the Houthis as fuel for the resistance axis in the foreseeable future, especially if they can avoid a regional war in the current conflict.

With the prolonged Western presence in the Red Sea and waters around the Arabian Peninsula, powers like Russia and China might be driven to support the Houthis to divert United States and European attention to this strategic region, while Russia faces challenges in Ukraine and China deals with issues in Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Moscow has already begun negotiating with the Houthis to supply them with advanced weapons,<sup>10</sup> and several Russian experts are advising the Houthis.<sup>11</sup> This could directly affect the national security of the Arabian Peninsula States and the Horn of Africa, in particular.

## **Future Scenarios Facing Houthi Ambitions:**

### **First Scenario :A Larger Role for the Houthis in the Region**

It is evident that the Houthis' role is expanding within Iran's regional sphere of influence. In the absence of prominent leaders like Hassan Nasrallah, the Houthis may seek to fill the leadership vacuum within the "Resistance Axis", increasing their involvement in regional conflicts. If Iran wants to maintain its influence over regional issues, the empowerment of the Houthis will be bolstered, either through future escalations or by strengthening their deep-rooted relationships in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon.

Several factors support this scenario, including the increasing military capabilities of the Houthis, which will grow with Iranian support. The geography of Yemen enables them to attract, train, and coordinate with new fighters and groups, fostering open relationships with regional entities.

The Houthis exhibit bold decision-making tendencies without considering the repercussions on the lives of Yemenis and the national security of Yemen and the region.

## Second Scenario :Western Escalation with Regional Partnership

Western escalation in operations against the Houthis could be effective in limiting their capabilities ,potentially including targeting the group's leadership and control structures .However ,achieving this goal requires updated intelligence on the Houthis 'power ,movements ,and positioning of the Houthis and their leaders ,as they have strong abilities in concealment ,deception ,and decentralization .The international coalition would need a ground operation led by local groups as the spearhead ,which requires their unification .However ,a key obstacle is that regional states are not ready to engage in a new war with the Houthis without a clear strategy to end their rule .Ongoing airstrikes without a clear strategy only result in humanitarian damage ,affect infrastructure ,and create societal sympathy for the Houthis ,despite the dire economic situation and their brutal repression ,including of humanitarian workers.

## Third Scenario :Diplomatic Solutions

If the United States and the West move to weaken Iran and enhance their strategy against the Houthis by targeting Houthi leaders and aligning with the Yemeni government, this could push the Houthis towards negotiating solutions that preserve the group's existence. Diplomatic solutions without pressure on the Houthis give them greater leverage to achieve their old and new conditions to solidify their presence as "legitimate" representatives of Yemen, replacing the internationally recognized government, and achieve their goals in the Red Sea war. The Houthis are counting on support from Russia and China at the Security Council to shift the alignment away from their opponents, the internationally recognized government. If Western mobilization in the region continues and Russian and Chinese involvement increases, it is likely we will see a shift in the rare consensus on the Yemeni issue at the Security Council.

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