

# **Harnessing National Causes to Reassert Control over Tribal Decision-Making**

**The Yemeni Tribe and Houthi Escalation in the Red Sea 2024–2026**

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## Abstract

This study examines the profound impact of the Houthi group's involvement in the Red Sea conflict on Yemen's tribal structure between 2024 and 2026. It argues that the Houthis used the escalation as a strategic opportunity to harness national and religious causes in order to reassert control over tribal decision-making. This came as tribal influence was declining and tribal cohesion was being weakened by Houthi repression. Using a descriptive-analytical approach and sources in Arabic, English, Persian, French, and German, the study examines the Houthis' discourse, tribal responses, and signs of tactical success and strategic failure. It also considers the long-term effects on tribal identity and leadership. It concludes that the Houthis achieved tactical success in mobilizing tribes through ideologically driven militarization. Yet that success contains the potential for deep structural fractures that could redraw the map of tribal allegiances in the post-conflict period.

**Keywords:** Yemeni tribe; Houthis; Red Sea; ideologically driven militarization; political discourse; tribal allegiance; supervisors; party-spirit (asabiyyah).

## First: Introduction and Methodological Framework

With its complex composition and millennia-old history, the tribe is indispensable to understanding Yemen's political and social dynamics. It has long played a central role in shaping state and society, moving between autonomy and integration and between preserving customary norms and adapting to modern change. For centuries, Yemeni tribes formed the nucleus of major political entities. The ancient Yemeni kingdoms of Saba, Himyar, and Qataban were essentially broad tribal alliances that built centralized systems of government while preserving the autonomy of their constituent tribes. In the modern era, the tribe has remained a political actor that cannot be bypassed. It has never been the antithesis of the state, but rather "a complement to its functions and a check on the tyranny of its rulers." At moments of major crisis, it has consistently served as the ultimate arbiter.

**This study proceeds from the understanding that the phenomenon under examination lies at the intersection of three overlapping levels of analysis. The first is the tribal structure as a social and political entity with a long history and deeply rooted customs. The second is the Houthi group as a politico-ideological actor seeking to re-engineer society according to its ideological vision. The third is the regional and international conflict that provided the context in which the Houthis sought to redraw the map of internal allegiances. As the tribe's influence was declining and its cohesion weakening under Houthi policies designed to hollow out traditional leadership and impose a system of "supervisors," the Red Sea escalation—and the slogans of "supporting Gaza" and "confronting America and Israel"—offered the Houthis a valuable opportunity to remobilize tribes that had begun to chafe under the group's repressive policies. [1]**

**This "ideologically driven militarization," built around national and religious causes with deep resonance in the collective consciousness, did more than slow the growth of tribal anger. It may also have reshaped some allegiances, or at least created new justifications for joining the group. Antonio Gramsci's concept of "cultural hegemony" helps explain this phenomenon: the Houthis do not rely solely on military and security coercion but also seek to manufacture social "consent" by deploying religious and national symbols to legitimize their authority in the tribal collective consciousness. [2]**

**The study's central hypothesis is that the Houthis treated the Red Sea escalation as a "strategic opportunity" to harness national and religious causes in order to reassert control over tribal decision-making through a complex set of discursive and mobilizational mechanisms. It addresses four main research questions. What discursive strategies did the Houthis use to mobilize tribes around the Red Sea issue? How did Yemeni tribes respond? To what extent did the Houthis genuinely succeed in using the escalation to consolidate their influence? What are the long-term implications of this mobilization for the tribe's structure and future political role? The study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology and draws on academic studies, strategic reports, human rights and media reporting, and documented interviews.**

## Second: Yemen's Tribal Structure and Shifting Power

The Yemeni tribe is an integrated social, political, and military institution. Its role extends beyond social organization to include participation in political decision-making and the preservation of collective security. In his celebrated *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun identified tribal *asabiyyah*—party-spirit—as the driving force of political history in Arab societies, arguing that no state can arise without a strong social bond that gives it cohesion and the capacity to act. [3] In Yemen, this party-spirit found expression in major tribal confederations such as Hashid, Bakil, and Khawlan, which for centuries served as the state's “reservoir of manpower” and its principal military instrument.

Successive regimes—particularly that of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh—pursued a strategy of “tribal containment” by incorporating sheikhs into state institutions and granting them economic and political privileges. This simultaneously politicized the tribe and weakened its autonomy. In his seminal study *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, German scholar Marieke Brandt observes that the Yemeni tribe was never the antithesis of the state, but rather “a complement to its functions and a check on the tyranny of its rulers.” [4] The historic rivalry between Hashid and Bakil also created a balance that prevented any one party from monopolizing absolute power and made the tribe a source of refuge and protection for persecuted political forces.

Sociologically, the Yemeni tribe performs several functions beyond the social sphere. It provides protection and security where the central state is weak, participates in decision-making through a system of tribal precedents and customary law, and constitutes the popular army on which successive regimes have relied. Anthropological studies have shown that the Yemeni tribe possesses an exceptional resilience that allows it to adapt to political change without losing its essential identity. This helps explain its ability to withstand successive waves of transformation.

## The Houthis and the Tribes: From Alliance to Subjugation

The Houthi movement emerged in the distinctly tribal environment of Sa'ada Governorate and understood from the outset that the path to power ran through the tribe. During the Believing Youth phase, from the 1990s to 2004, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi drew on his family's tribal connections and used a discourse of "economic marginalization" and "national dignity" to court tribes disaffected with the central state. [5] During the six Sa'ada wars of 2004–2010, tribes split between government supporters and Houthi allies. Ali Abdullah Saleh's approach to managing the war—his tactic of "dancing on the heads of snakes"—drove many Sa'ada tribes into the Houthis' arms out of hostility toward the central regime, while others adopted a neutral position.

After the Houthis seized Sana'a in 2014, the relationship changed fundamentally. The tribe was no longer a partner to be courted, but an object of subjugation and transformation. The Houthis understood that continuing a policy of "partnership" with the tribes meant accepting an independently powerful partner that could one day become an existential threat. They therefore pursued a strategy of comprehensive subordination. During this phase, the Houthis successfully built "parallel social networks" within tribes, drawing on family ties and marriages into prominent tribal families.

### Policies to Dismantle and Subjugate the Tribe 2015–2023

Following their takeover of Sana'a, the Houthis adopted a systematic policy to dismantle the tribal structure and subordinate it to their centralized ideological authority. This policy rested on four closely connected and mutually reinforcing mechanisms.

First was the system of "supervisors," under which "cultural and security supervisors" displaced the tribal sheikh as the highest authority in tribal areas. A supervisor is not merely a security official, but the "absolute ruler" of his area, selected on the basis of unwavering ideological loyalty rather than competence or traditional legitimacy. Each area has a network of specialized supervisors: a social supervisor who monitors disputes and family relations; a cultural supervisor who oversees mosques, schools, and gatherings; and a security supervisor who monitors political activity and reports opponents. All operate above the authority of the district director and tribal sheikh, hollowing out traditional leadership and reducing it to a largely ceremonial façade. [6]

**Second was the displacement of traditional leadership. Historically influential sheikhs were marginalized and replaced by ideologically loyal “guarantor sheikhs.” This created fault lines within individual tribes: between those loyal to customary traditions and those loyal to the supervisor, and between older generations that respect tribal custom and younger generations raised in Houthi summer camps. The battle for Amran in July 2014 was the pivotal moment in breaking the power of the strongest tribal confederations. The demolition of homes belonging to sheikhs of the al-Ahmar family sent a message of terror to other tribes: this was not merely a military defeat, but the symbolic fall of the “sheikh” before the “supervisor.”**

**Third were economic levies that burdened tribes through taxes, including zakat and the khums, as well as land confiscation. These measures impoverished tribal elites and tied their economic interests to the group. The Houthis turned the tribal economy into an instrument of political subjugation: a sheikh who refused to collect or pay levies became liable to collective punishment extending to his entire tribe. [7]**

**Fourth was the bureaucratic absorption of the Saleh-era intelligence services. The Houthis took over the Political Security Organization (PSO) and the National Security Bureau (NSB), institutions through which Saleh had accumulated leverage by means of patronage networks and instruments of pressure. By controlling “tribal affairs” files, the Houthis exploited decades of accumulated information—debts, blood feuds, and personal vulnerabilities—to blackmail sheikhs. The relationship was thus transformed from the negotiated “patronage partnership” of the Saleh era into “coercive dependency.”**

### **Third: Houthi Discourse toward the Tribes amid the Red Sea Escalation**

**The Red Sea escalation marked a fundamental shift in Houthi discourse toward the tribes: the focus moved from “local grievance” to a narrative of “global confrontation.” This was not spontaneous, but a carefully calibrated strategy to redraw the map of tribal allegiances at a time when domestic anger was mounting over unpaid salaries and deteriorating services. The discursive shift unfolded through three successive phases: solidarity with Gaza from October to December 2023; mobilization for “maritime jihad” from January to March 2025; and, finally, the transformation of the cause into an “axis of identity” that defined and distinguished the Houthis from April 2024 onward.**

## Harnessing the Palestinian Cause and the Strategy of Moral Pressure

The Houthis recognized the Palestinian cause's emotional centrality for Yemeni tribes. In Yemen's tribal consciousness, Palestinians are not merely an oppressed people, but violated brethren whom the values of tribal honor require others to defend. The Houthis adroitly exploited this collective sentiment, turning the slogan of "supporting Gaza" into a potent instrument of moral pressure. It became difficult for any tribal sheikh or individual to oppose Houthi policies without being accused of abandoning the Palestinian cause and violating the values of tribal honor. [8]

This provided ideal cover for compulsory recruitment and fundraising. Refusal to enlist became "a betrayal of Gaza," while refusing to pay levies became "a failure to support the oppressed." The Houthis transformed the Palestinian cause from a humanitarian issue inspiring local sympathy and solidarity into an instrument of domestic pressure, deliberately intertwining its moral and political dimensions. More troublingly, this exploitation compelled silent opponents to remain silent about domestic abuses, because any public objection was immediately interpreted as "siding with the enemy" at a moment of "decisive battle."

## The Discourse of Treason and Political Excommunication

The Houthis systematically used accusations of treason to silence tribal opposition. Any criticism of their domestic policies was portrayed as "betrayal of the nation" and "alignment with the American-Israeli aggression." This form of political excommunication "paralyzed tribal opposition and neutralized leaders who rejected Houthi rule." Hesitant sheikhs found themselves facing an impossible choice: silence and submission, or confrontation accompanied by charges of treason. The discourse was applied selectively and shrewdly. Sheikhs who voiced reservations about recruitment policies were accused of "working as agents for Saudi Arabia" or "ties to Zionism" [9]—charges sufficient in themselves to silence opposition in the tribal communities under Houthi control.

James C. Scott's concept of the "weapons of the weak" helps explain the tribal response. Under severe coercion, weakened groups resort to hidden forms of resistance: feigned obedience accompanied by private rejection, quiet evasion of recruitment, gossip, and covert ridicule. This is precisely what has been observed by more than fifteen Yemeni researchers and journalists who meet tribal leaders living under Houthi control.

In January 2024, the Yemeni Scholars Association held a conference in Sana'a entitled "The Scholars of the Ummah and Their Responsibility to Support the Oppressed in Gaza and Palestine." The conference issued religious edicts mandating general mobilization and recruitment, and presented obedience to Abdul-Malik al-Houthi as the "standard-bearer guardian" as a religious duty in confronting the Zionist-American alliance. [10] The edicts prompted major recruitment campaigns and framed the weekly mass rallies in al-Sabeen Square in Sana'a and other governorates as a sacred religious ritual of mobilization—one that demonstrated popular authorization for the Houthi leadership and "disavowal of treacherous agents." This category included the group's opponents in areas under its control, as well as tribal figures who remained silent and declined to align themselves with its wartime propaganda.

At weekly armed tribal gatherings, sheikhs—most of them guarantor sheikhs—and tribal fighters repeat central themes such as "purging the ranks of traitors" and "raising readiness to confront internal movements." This suggests that military preparations are directed not only toward the Red Sea, but also toward eliminating remaining pockets of domestic opposition. The group has also used what it describes as "security achievements" to intimidate tribal voices demanding salaries or speaking about public affairs. [11] Repression has extended to national-day celebrations. The Houthis intensified their pursuit and imprisonment of those celebrating the September 26 Revolution, which ended Imamate rule, across most areas under their control, branding such celebrations an act of collaboration. The gatherings went beyond declaring disavowal and explicitly demanded that the "competent authorities impose the severest penalties on anyone implicated in crimes of treason and collaboration."

### Media and Cultural Instruments of Mobilization

The Houthis have deployed a large and diverse media and cultural arsenal to penetrate tribal consciousness. They have made intensive use of the zamil—a form of chanted tribal poetry—to arouse martial fervor and cast the Red Sea confrontation in heroic terms. The zamil is not merely a folk art; it is "the tribe's collective memory and its foremost instrument of mobilization." The Houthis produced dozens of zawamil about Red Sea operations and embedded them in tribal consciousness through social media channels and tribal gatherings.

They exploit the tribal character of Yemeni society, in which the zamil is seen as a communal ritual that preserves a tribe's identity, traditions, and alliances. By reviving this distinctive poetic tradition, the Houthis can mobilize tribal support because the zamil also serves as a means of reconciliation during local disputes, negotiations between opposing parties in tribal areas, and intertribal wars. [12]

In parallel, the group has used social media and Telegram to direct mobilizational messages at tribal youth, bypassing the authority of traditional sheikhs. It launched coordinated campaigns such as #Yemen\_Standswith\_Palestine and #You\_Are\_Not\_Alone, in which tribal activists participated under the direction of cultural supervisors. These platforms are also used to respond rapidly to domestic criticism and portray opponents as “electronic flies” serving the Zionist agenda. In addition, mobile networks in Houthi-controlled areas send messages to citizens urging them to participate in these hashtag campaigns. This digital penetration of the tribal structure is unprecedented. Historically, young people received direction from the tribal sheikh; today, they receive it from a “digital supervisor” through a Telegram channel. Mosques and preachers have likewise been used to bind loyalty to the tribe to ideological allegiance to the “Quranic March,” merging religious authority with political mobilization.

The Zainabiyat women's units have assumed a prominent role in penetrating tribal households. They organize awareness circles for women designed to reshape convictions within the tribal family. This approach represents “one of the most effective and hardest-to-monitor forms of ideological penetration” because it operates within the private sphere of the tribal household, beyond the view of sheikhs and observers. [13]

#### **Fourth: Tribal Responses to Mobilization—Between Submission and Resistance**

Tribal responses to Houthi mobilization have not been uniform. They vary according to each tribe's geography and political history, the availability of political alternatives, and the extent to which it has suffered under earlier Houthi policies. These responses can be divided into three principal patterns: coerced integration, silent resistance or “political taqiyya,” (precautionary dissimulation) and open rejection.

## Tribes around Sana'a: Coerced Integration and Mutual Interests

The tribes surrounding Sana'a, the country's most important demographic and political center, displayed a high level of participation in the mobilization. This can be explained by "tribal pragmatism": tribal elites understood that their survival and economic interests depended on accommodation with the ruling authority. The Red Sea escalation also gave some sheikhs affiliated with the General People's Congress a way to repair relations with the Houthis under the umbrella of the "national position" and "support for Gaza."

This integration does not necessarily reflect ideological conviction; rather, it is a "choice of necessity" in the absence of viable alternatives. Three tribal sheikhs from Bani Matar in Sana'a and Kharif in Amran said that the options available to them were existential: "Either we remain, or we—and everything we own—are eliminated on charges of treason." [14] Among the Hashid tribes in particular, relations with the Houthis have always been complex. Hashid is the tribal confederation of the al-Ahmar family, which clashed with the Houthis, but also of the late president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who subsequently allied with them. This complicated history has produced varied responses to mobilization even within Hashid itself, embodying the "fragmentation of tribal identity."

## Silent Resistance and Political Taqiyya

By contrast, many tribes in governorates such as Dhamar, Ibb, Hajjah, and Raymah have adopted a strategy of "silent resistance" or "political taqiyya" (precautionary dissimulation). They have outwardly displayed loyalty and participated in rallies and "Al-Aqsa Flood" military courses in support of Gaza in order to avoid friction with the Houthis, while refraining from sending their sons to the front lines. The Houthis have consequently had to expend considerable effort on recruitment, as most tribes continue to refuse to take a collective decision to send their sons to fight and instead treat enlistment as an individual choice.

This distinction between an "ethical position" and "political exploitation" reflects the tribes' deep awareness of the Houthis' nature and actual objectives. Some tribes devised creative means of avoiding recruitment, including sending seasonal food aid or paying money—presented as aid—in lieu of providing recruits. This represents a pragmatic adaptation to Houthi pressure. In Dhamar, observers documented a pattern of "selective absence": tribal sheikhs attend official Houthi events but refrain from endorsing the recruitment of their sons, exploiting the gap between official rhetoric and implementation on the ground. [15]

More than a year after the Red Sea crisis and the onset of Houthi attacks, the group became increasingly concerned about silent tribal resistance. Tribal leaders used social occasions as platforms to express defiance and revive alliances. Although civilian in nature, these events carried profound political implications. In August 2025, the group sent threats to Sheikh Himyar bin Abdullah al-Ahmar, paramount sheikh of Hashid, and Sheikh Naji al-Shayef, paramount sheikh of Bakil, as well as several other prominent sheikhs. They were warned against undertaking any social or tribal activity, even efforts to resolve disputes or attend social occasions. The group described such activity as “a departure from the leadership’s instructions” and “a betrayal of Palestine.” [16] The Houthis later paraded their forces outside Sheikh al-Ahmar’s home in Sana’a in a direct threat to the Hashid confederation itself. Although the group subsequently attempted to justify the move, the scale of the campaign against al-Ahmar and Hashid heightened tensions between the movement and the tribes. Accumulated anger and grievances, Houthi governance failures, and silent resistance have driven some tribal sheikhs to leave the movement’s ranks. [17]

### Clashes on the Ground and Resistance to Recruitment

The situation has also produced direct clashes on the ground. Several incidents of limited tribal rebellion have been recorded in governorates including Al-Bayda and Amran, where tribes refused to hand over their sons to recruitment supervisors or protested against heavy financial levies imposed under the pretext of “supporting the missile force.” The Al Humayqan and Qayfa tribes in Al-Bayda have been among the fiercest opponents of the Houthis, waging prolonged wars of attrition grounded in the tribal duty to defend land and honor. [18]

Even in Saada, the Houthis’ original stronghold, credible reports have documented opposition to recruitment among tribes that historically formed part of the group’s core constituency. Although limited in scale, these clashes expose the fragility of claims to absolute Houthi control and demonstrate that ideologically driven militarization has not completely erased independent tribal identity.

## Fifth: Strategic Assessment of Houthi Success and Latent Fractures

Any assessment of the Houthis' exploitation of the Red Sea escalation must carefully distinguish between short-term “tactical success” and potential long-term “strategic failure.” Tactically, the Houthis achieved several central objectives. They deferred domestic crises and redirected popular anger outward, thereby reducing internal tensions. The confrontation with major powers also enhanced their military prestige within a tribal culture that has historically valued strength. One tribal sheikh said: “The defiance and parity the Houthis displayed toward the United States, Britain, and Israel gave them a prestige no previous Yemeni regime had achieved.” [19]

Comparable regional experiences are instructive. Lebanon's Hezbollah successfully used confrontation with Israel to appeal to otherwise hesitant Lebanese sects and communities, while Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces invoked the discourse of al-jihad al-kifa'i—the religious duty of sufficient jihad—to recruit Iraqi youth from different regions. The Yemeni case differs, however, because the Yemeni tribe has a deeply rooted tradition of political autonomy unmatched by comparable groups in Lebanon or Iraq. This makes “complete absorption” more difficult and slower.

### Silencing Domestic Opposition: The Weapon of Consensus

The Houthis succeeded in turning the Red Sea issue into a “test of patriotism.” This neutralized tribal voices that had criticized hunger, levies, and deteriorating services. It became difficult for a tribal sheikh to speak about “the salary crisis” while “the country is under American-British aggression because of its position on Gaza.” This enforced silence has been a significant, if temporary, success in managing domestic crises. Yet the Houthis have merely postponed those crises as they continue to worsen over time.

The poor performance of the internationally recognized government and its tribal allies also strengthened the Houthi position. For tribesmen in Houthi-controlled areas, the group—despite its brutality—has a “clear project” and the capacity to act, while the other parties appear fragmented and beholden to external powers. This pushes tribes toward a “choice of necessity” and alignment with the Houthis.

## Pressure Points in Houthi-Tribal Relations

The Houthis skillfully exploited the Red Sea conflict to secure gains beyond their immediate military objectives, drawing on the tribal, religious, and cultural fabric of Yemeni society. Yet this also exposed the movement to deep pressure points, foremost among them economic pressures. U.S. sanctions imposed from the beginning of 2025 and Israeli strikes on ports and cement factories disrupted some revenue streams that had funded the group's patronage network among tribal sheikhs whose allegiance it had purchased. The movement could no longer sustain this burden and halted monthly payments worth tens of thousands of dollars. [\[20\]](#)

The Houthis invested heavily in reshaping the ideological and cultural landscape of northwestern Yemen by indoctrinating young people during the Red Sea conflict. Despite some success, that same generation is exposed to countervailing influences through social media, which “gives Yemeni youth a window onto the prosperity of the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Asian countries—a prosperity the Houthis have conspicuously failed to deliver.” [\[21\]](#)

## Latent Fractures and Potential Strategic Failure

Despite apparent successes, tribal allegiance to the Houthis remains fragile and contingent on exceptional circumstances. In terms of human losses, the Red Sea escalation increased casualties among tribesmen, particularly as a result of American-British air strikes on Houthi sites. There is also a stark gap between the rhetoric and the reality: the discourse of “pride and dignity” in the Red Sea contrasts sharply with poverty and hunger in tribal villages. Tribes may accept “sacrifice” for a limited time, but they will not accept “starving to death” indefinitely for battles that bring no improvement to their daily lives.

Threats and fear remain the principal drivers of many tribal allegiances. Loyalty founded on fear dissipates as soon as the means of coercion weakens. Historical experience in Yemen and elsewhere shows that regimes relying on intimidation as the basis of loyalty can collapse rapidly when their strength faces its first serious test. Houthi hegemony over the tribes is therefore “conditional hegemony,” not “sustainable hegemony.”

## Sixth: Long-Term Implications and Future Scenarios

The ideological and national mobilization undertaken by the Houthi group, also known as Ansar Allah, in the context of the Red Sea conflict between 2024 and 2026 constitutes a fundamental turning point in the evolution of the Yemeni tribe. Its effects extend beyond the present moment to the heart of tribal identity, the customary order, and the future of political stability in Yemen.

### Reshaping Identity: From Tribal party-spirit to Ideological party-spirit

The Houthis are working assiduously to replace tribal identity with an ideological identity centered on wilayah. Through “summer camps,” a new generation is being raised to pledge loyalty to the “Sayyid” rather than the tribal sheikh. This transformation threatens to dismantle the tribe as an autonomous social entity and reduce it to a mobilizational wing of the Houthi project.

A widening gap separates senior sheikhs seeking to preserve custom from the younger generation—graduates of the summer camps—whose absolute loyalty is to the “standard-bearer Sayyid.” This generational conflict threatens the tribe’s cohesion as a unified social entity and erodes its capacity for independent collective action. During the Red Sea crisis, numerous cases were observed in which tribesmen’s sons rejected their fathers’ orders and instead followed the supervisors’ directives—a stark reflection of generational shifts in allegiance that are redrawing the distribution of authority within the tribe.

The process bears a noteworthy resemblance to “the transformations experienced by Iranian tribes after the 1979 Islamic Revolution,” when the new regime sought to replace tribal and ethnic identities with an Islamic revolutionary identity. [22] Recruitment and privileges were opened to tribal youth who joined the Basij, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988. This involvement helped transfer the younger generation’s allegiance from the tribe to “the state and the revolution.” The Yemeni case differs, however, because the Yemeni tribe is more firmly established and deeply rooted in the social consciousness. Complete “Houthification” therefore remains extremely difficult, even over the long term.

## The Erosion of Tribal Custom and the Crisis of Leadership

The imposition of Houthi law—including the Tribal Honor Charter—and the authority of supervisors marginalizes the precedents and customary rules that governed tribal life for centuries. Houthi judicial changes, which in essence replace customary adjudication with the group's own justice system, strike at the heart of tribal autonomy. Historically, tribal custom provided the principal safeguard of tribal independence from the state. When tribal disputes are settled by a supervisor or the “Sayyid's Office”—the office of the Houthi leader—rather than through customary tribal arbitration, the tribe loses one of the most important sources of its internal cohesion and autonomous legitimacy.

More broadly, tribal custom under Houthi judicial reforms could follow several paths: it may adapt and survive as an alternative mechanism of justice; fragment under Houthi pressure; or generate a “tribal awakening” in reaction to Houthi discrimination against the tribes. The precise trajectory will depend on the tribes' ability to resist or adapt to Houthi control, as well as broader political and military developments in Yemen.

At the same time, the rise of guarantor sheikhs who lack traditional legitimacy is creating a profound crisis of trust between the tribal base and its leaders, weakening the tribe's ability to act collectively in any future political phase. A sheikh appointed by the Houthis does not possess the traditional legitimacy derived from lineage, history, generosity, and courage. He has only a “legitimacy of force” derived from the supervisor's support—and that legitimacy will disappear when its source does.

Continuous mobilization and levies have also created a rift between tribesmen and sheikhs whom some regard as “brokers” who recruit their sons. This crisis of trust will make it difficult for the tribe to perform its traditional mediating role in any future political settlement, as tribal leaders lose their ability to maintain discipline and cohesion.

## Future Scenarios

Three principal scenarios can be envisaged for the future relationship between the Houthis and the tribes.

**Scenario One—Complete Integration:** The Houthis succeed in completing the process of “Houthification,” transforming the tribes into a theocratic structure wholly subordinate to the center, along the lines of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard’s relationship with Iranian tribes. This scenario would require continued external military pressure to keep the tribes in a state of defensive mobilization, as well as a continued flow of Iranian resources to finance domestic fronts. Its likelihood remains low, but it could materialize if the regional conflict continues for another decade and the Houthis remain the sole dominant force in northwestern Yemen.

**Scenario Two—Internal Explosion:** A broad tribal uprising erupts under the combined weight of economic pressure and human attrition once the Houthi security grip weakens or Iranian support ceases. Potential triggers include an expanding tribal-Houthi confrontation; a sharp rise in tribal casualties on the battlefronts without tangible gains; or a severe economic collapse that deprives the Houthis of the ability to distribute rewards and privileges.

**Scenario Three—Pragmatic Realignment:** In light of Yemen’s tribal history, this is the most likely scenario. Once the war ends or the balance of power changes, tribes shift their allegiances and seek new alliances in keeping with their historically pragmatic character. Throughout history, the Yemeni tribe has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to “realign” after every period of pressure and has treated allegiance as “a temporary contract, open to renewal or termination” according to interests and circumstances. The Hashemite Houthi movement will ultimately find itself isolated because of its coercion of the tribes, just as the leaders of the Imamate found themselves isolated after their war against the tribally backed republican regime between 1962 and 1970.

## Conclusion

This in-depth study has shown that the Yemeni tribe—the country’s most deeply rooted social and political institution—underwent profound structural transformations as a result of Houthi policies and the group’s exploitation of the Red Sea escalation between 2024 and 2026. What began as the exploitation of a “strategic opportunity” to remobilize tribes under religious and national slogans evolved into a comprehensive recasting of the tribe’s relationship with authority, its identity, and the future of its role in Yemen.

The study shows that the Houthis achieved tactical success by using the Red Sea issue as common ground around which to close ranks. Their mobilizational discourse combined the language of “jihad,” “supporting Gaza,” and “confronting global arrogance.” Backed by powerful media instruments, including the zamil and social media, this discourse placed tribes under moral pressure and pushed them to participate—or at least neutralized their opposition. The policies of branding opponents as traitors and subjecting them to political excommunication also silenced dissenting voices, giving the group considerable room for maneuver.

Yet this tactical success is accompanied by deep strategic fractures. As Section Four demonstrates, tribal responses were varied and complex, ranging from outward support and silent resistance, or *taqiyya* (precautionary dissimulation), to open rejection in some areas. Reliance on guarantor sheikhs and the marginalization of traditional leaders also created an internal rift that threatens the tribe’s long-term cohesion. Allegiance founded on fear and material incentives rather than ideological conviction or customary legitimacy remains fragile and liable to collapse when circumstances change.

Over the long term, the consequences of this mobilization portend far-reaching change. The Houthi attempt to replace “tribal *asabiyyah*” with “ideological *asabiyyah*,” the erosion of tribal custom in the face of Houthi law, and the emergence of a new generation of ideologically loyal tribal leaders will all reshape the tribe’s identity and role. Future trajectories range from complete integration into the Houthi project, to internal explosion under the weight of attrition and economic pressure, to pragmatic realignment at the first political opportunity.

In conclusion, by skillfully exploiting the Red Sea escalation, the Houthis have won a round in their struggle with the Yemeni tribe, but they have not yet won the contest. With its long history of adaptation and resistance, the Yemeni tribe may find new ways to reassert its identity and role, albeit in a context very different from that of a decade ago. This study remains a point of departure for further research and analysis, particularly as the Yemeni and regional landscape continues to be fluid and subject to constant change.



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[8] Direct monitoring of Al-Masirah Television coverage and social media networks in Houthi-controlled areas during 2025 and through April 2026. The researcher retains monthly monitoring records relating to general mobilization and the movement's discourse.

[9] Ten sheikhs from the tribal belt surrounding Sana'a spoke to the researcher between April and September 2025.

[10] "Al-Aqsa Flood and the Battle of the Promised Conquest: How the Houthis Mobilize Popular Support," Yemen Peace Forum, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. <https://sanaacenter.org/ypf/how-the-houthis-mobilize-popular-support/>

[11] Direct monitoring of Al-Masirah Television coverage and social media networks in Houthi-controlled areas during 2025 and through April 2026. The researcher retains monthly monitoring records relating to general mobilization and the movement's discourse.

[12] Videos of zawamil on YouTube are among the Houthi movement's most popular and fastest-growing propaganda vehicles. These sung war poems attract a wide audience because of their rousing melodies and are also used to evoke sentiments of valor, victory, and independence. Among the most prominent poets and media producers of Houthi zawamil on YouTube is Issa al-Laith, who has a substantial presence on the platform, with more than 477,000 subscribers and 280 uploaded videos openly glorifying the Houthi militia's political and logistical advances in Yemen.

[13] Direct interviews conducted between 2024 and 2026 with four tribal sheikhs and six women who attended women's social events at which the Zainabiyat were present and transformed occasions—including weddings, funerals, and engagements—into ideological lectures about the Quranic March.

[14] Tribal sheikhs spoke at a popular qat gathering in Al-Mahwit Governorate, northwest of Sana'a, during the funeral of a prominent tribal sheikh, Zaid Abu Ali, in July 2025.

[15] Four tribal sheikhs in Dhamar Governorate spoke to the researcher during a qat session in Dhamar city, south of Sana'a, on December 11, 2024.

[16] "Houthi Military Parade Outside Sheikh al-Ahmar's Home Sparks Widespread Anger and Reveals Mounting Tensions with Yemeni Tribes," Yemen Monitor, published August 14, 2025; accessed May 14, 2026. <https://www.yemenmonitor.com/Details/ArtMID/908/ArticleID/147637>

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[19] A tribal sheikh from Ibb Governorate spoke to the researcher at a qat gathering in Yarim District on January 15, 2026.

[20] Three tribal sources and a Houthi source familiar with the details spoke in early January 2026 and said that the payments had ceased several months earlier. In March, a tribal source in Al-Jawf Governorate said that the Houthis had partially resumed salary payments to a limited number of allied tribal sheikhs amid fears that Saudi Arabia might buy their allegiance.

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