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Shades of grey: The evolving links between the Houthi and Iran

The Houthi are not an Iranian proxy in the sense of unquestioningly doing Tehran's bidding, voluntarily or under pressure. Yet, the movement can be viewed as an informal partner of Tehran. Their relationship has evolved from a partnership of convenience into a more strategic one. Despite this evolution, the Houthi have remained autonomous with respect to their domestic constituencies, political strategy and battlefield operations. For the purpose of peacemaking in Yemen today, as well as subsequent efforts to maintain any peace, this suggests that the Houthi should be considered an autonomous, domestically legitimate (in part) and capable actor, but that Iran also needs to be consulted behind the scenes due to the growth of its relation with the Houthi.

Introduction

In August 2014, the Ansarullah Movement – better known as the Houthi¹ – took control of Sana'a, Yemen's capital. Their professed aim was, and remains, to liberate ordinary Yemenis from oppression and injustice, at least according to the movement's leader, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) took the view that the Houthi were – and are – better seen as an extension of Iran's geopolitical designs to destabilise the Arabian Peninsula and expand the so-called 'Shi'a crescent'. This view has

come to dominate the international framing of the Yemeni civil war due to Iran's growing regional profile after 2011–2012, and despite Houthi involvement in longer-standing domestic disputes between Sunni and Shi'a, as well as homegrown tribal clashes. To counter this threat, Saudi Arabia and the UAE formed a military coalition and entered Yemen. But were they right in equating Houthi activities with Iranian foreign policy interests?²

According to Duner (1981), a proxy is a domestic party forced by a foreign sponsor to intervene in an internal conflict on its behalf. Clearly, the Houthi are not an Iranian proxy in this sense. After all, the Yemeni civil war started in 2011 with the overthrow of President Saleh and

1 The Houthi are a religious movement, not a tribe, originating from Sa'ada, Yemen's northernmost province. Over recent decades, their sphere of influence gradually expanded to cover much of the north of the country. The Houthi are Zaydi Shi'a in terms of their religious beliefs, but constitute only a small minority of the 35 per cent of the Yemeni population that follows this creed (informal estimates suggest around 2 per cent). See: <https://fanack.com/yemen/population-of-yemen/> (accessed 22 December 2022).

2 My thanks go to Hamidreza Azizi, Nancy Ezzeddine and Erwin van Veen (all Clingendael) for their contributions and feedback on this brief.

resumed after the failure of the 2013 National Dialogue Conference.³ The Houthi were engaged in both the civil war and the National Dialogue Conference from their beginning without Iranian encouragement. Moreover, the Houthi had been fighting the Yemeni government since the early 1990s, long before any material Iranian involvement. But if, as Moghadam and Wyss (2020) would have it, ‘proxy-ness’ is instead an informal collaborative partnership in which one party (state or non-state) materially sponsors another (the proxy) to help realise its own strategic goals, the Houthi do fit the ‘proxy’ label.⁴ According to the literature, ideological affinity and shared strategic interests are additional factors that are relevant in assessing the extent to which the Houthi can be seen as an extension of Iranian foreign policy interests.⁵ Below, I take stock of these dimensions in turn.

Proxy dimension 1: How relevant has Iranian material support been to the Houthi?

A first dimension that is relevant in assessing the relationship between the Houthi and Iran is the relevance of the material support Tehran has provided to the Houthi, i.e. weapons, advice and finance, compared with other Houthi sources of power such as its networks, domestic legitimacy and sources of revenue.

Networks. The descent that the Houthi claim from the Prophet Mohammed’s family (known as *Ahl al-Bayt*) via the historical Zaydi Imamates

that ruled North Yemen until 1962, gives the movement significant socio-religious standing and legitimacy in parts of the country. They have used this status to build support among the main tribal confederations of the north, the Bakil and Hashid, as well as others in Amran, Sa’ada, Hjjah, and Dhamar. Additionally, the Houthi used tribal agreements known as *Musawana* to neutralise tribes when necessary. As a result, to a large extent they were able to limit the association of the north’s major tribes with former President Saleh’s regime. Tribal support also enabled the Houthi to govern northern Yemen as an alternative authority for decades. Iran played no role in these developments.

Constituency. From the beginning, the Houthi had a strong local constituency that gave it a solid domestic power base. This constituency dates back to at least the 1990s and grew from the organisation’s tribal-religious roots in Yemen’s furthest north even though the Houthi are a movement and not a tribe. Its constituency expanded from this area to adjacent tribes and communities following a model of concentric circles. The Houthi expansionary strategy of social mobilisation and influencing during the 2000s was based on an Iranian model, which the Houthi leadership was exposed to during its sojourn in Qom in the 1990s. Members of the Houthi *Believing Youth* movement set up learning centres and summer camps to re-teach Zaydi principles while they also doubled as recruiting hubs and sought to counter Saudi-sponsored attempts to spread Wahabism in north Yemen.⁶ These hubs mirrored Iran’s early strategy of uniting the Shi’a of southern Lebanon, and a number of *Believing Youth* members were trained in Qom. The movement’s consistent emphasis on the oppression and social injustice of the Saleh regime enabled the Houthi to evolve beyond its natural audience of Yemeni Zaydi Shi’a into a broader socio-political movement. Former President Saleh’s intentional failure to

3 Duner, B., ‘Proxy intervention in civil wars’, *Journal of Peace Research*, No. 4, Vol. XVIII, 1981.

4 Moghadam, A. and M. Wyss, ‘The Political Power of Proxies: Why Nonstate Actors Use Local Surrogates’, *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Spring 2020), pp. 119–157.

5 For further reading on the proxies-in-civil-war literature, see for example: San-Akca, Belgin. *States in disguise: causes of state support for rebel groups*. Oxford University Press, 2016; Szekeley, Ora. ‘A Friend in Need: The Impact of the Syrian Civil War on Syria’s Clients (A Principal–Agent Approach)’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 3 (2016): 450–468; and Hensell, Stephan and Felix Gerdes. ‘Exit from war: the transformation of rebels into post-war power elites’, *Security Dialogue* 48, no. 2 (2017): 168–184.

6 Adel Daeshela, ‘Northern Yemeni Tribes During The Eras Of Ali Abdullah Saleh And The Houthi Movement: A Comparative Study’, *Sana’a Centre for Strategic Studies*, 14 February 2022, accessed 3 December 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16670>.

provide decent public services to the Sa'dah and Amran governorates created broad public discontent and grievances, which the Houthi used to transform a sectarian-based agenda into a grievance based one.⁷ Inspired by Iranian social mobilisation methods, the movement thus expanded its social influence and support base across much of northern Yemen between 2004 and 2011.

Finances. In the early 2000s, the Houthi were already collecting voluntary contributions from businessmen, taxes from ordinary citizens in North Yemen, and donations to liberate Palestine. Once they had seized Sana'a in 2011, they also started to collect revenues from Yemen's gas and oil fields, levy taxes and fees, and appropriate customs revenue from the port of Hodeidah. Allegedly, Iran also provided the Houthi with financial support through the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), but to what extent is difficult to estimate.⁸ Anyhow, it is safe to say the Houthis had a sound financial base of their own.

Iran did come to play a larger role in supporting the Houthi war effort after Saudi Arabia intervened in 2014, by providing military advice and weaponry.⁹ But Iranian support neither influenced Houthi objectives nor the movement's ability to remain locally anchored in terms of narrative and mobilisation capability.¹⁰ For example, the Houthi objective has always been to restore their authority in north Yemen as rooted in their historical and bloodline connections with the Zaydi Imamates. On balance, one might say that Iranian material support played a modest role and was not decisive.

Proxy dimension 2: Ideological affinity between the Houthi and Tehran?

A second dimension that is relevant in assessing the relationship between the Houthi and Iran is the level of ideological affinity between them. If both actors share a deeper level of 'ideational bonding', it is more likely they operate in partnership and this would justify the Saudi and Emirati perception that both are part of the same regional threat, albeit not necessarily that the Houthi are an Iranian proxy. Here, ideological convictions refer to a shared sense of belonging to the transnational Shi'a community regarding identity and ideas that promote militant action against oppression – perceived or real. Otherwise put, it is about the existence of a shared affiliation with the axis of resistance. With regards to religious aspects of ideology, affinity appears to be relatively weak, since Iranian Shi'a follow the Twelver *Madhhab* and the Houthis follow the Zaydi *Madhhab*, two strands of Shi'ism that are based on different conceptions of the Imamates.¹¹

But the Houthi do share an ideological narrative of longstanding oppression and injustice with other Shi'a populations in the Middle East, which is nurtured by Iran, irrespective of differences in religious doctrine. After Yemen's unification in 1990, the country became predominantly Sunni, with Zaydi Shi'a suddenly representing only about 35 per cent of the population.¹² In contrast with their relative dominance in the former Yemen Arab Republic (north Yemen), the unification of Yemen caused the Zaydi Shi'a (of whom the Houthi are a small minority) a

7 Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), 10.

8 Abdo Albahesh, 'The Houthi Movement in Yemen: From Insurgency to Military Coup, 2004–2014', Medium, 23 October 2018, accessed 4 December 2022, <https://medium.com/@drabdoalbahesh/the-houthi-movement-in-yemen-from-insurgency-to-military-coup-2004-2010-6756fbfa410b>.

9 Thomas Juneau, 'Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A limited return on a modest investment', *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2016): 647–650.

10 *Ibid.* 656.

11 Briefly put, the Houthi claim direct descent from the Prophet Muhammed and have a clear direct link to Zayd Bin Ali who was the great grandson of Caliph Ali and the prophet's cousin, as well as his son in law. The Houthis differ from Twelver Shi'ism in the number of Imams they believe have existed, and their renunciation of the position of Ayatollah. In contrast, Twelver Shi'a do not consider Zayd bin Ali as one of the twelve imams.

12 Christopher Boucek, 'Yemen: On the brink', Carnegie Endowment, April 2010, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf.

significant loss of political and social status as population group. For context, it is useful to note that the north's Zaydi Shi'a rulers had already been replaced with new northern political elites after the 1962 revolution, whose ideals were more republican than religious, and who aspired to Yemeni unification. Moreover, the elites of the newly-created Yemeni republic considered Zaydi ideas of governance backward. As a result, the Houthi were largely excluded from re-unified Yemen's political and social networks and subjected to domestic repression. These events pushed the Houthi to look for allies who could relate to their situation and augment their ability to resist. This development was amplified by the exclusion of the Al-Haqq party from Yemen's parliament, which had been established by Yemeni Zaydis to represent their interests after unity, and to counterbalance Sunni parties like Al-Islah.

As Iran provided a safe haven for Hussein Al-Houthi (the movement's leader at the time) in Qom, away from the political oppression of former President Saleh, Al-Houthi drew closer to Iranian Shi'a clerics. Tehran gradually became friendly with the Houthi. Al-Houthi's time in Iran in the 1990s coincided with growing Shi'a discontent across the Persian Gulf and appears to have strengthened Al-Houthi's determination to resist domestic oppression, revive Zaydism against Saudi initiatives to spread Wahhabism in north Yemen, and create social bases of support.¹³ Iranian experience furnished the Houthi movement with a style of sloganeering, public discourse and ideational orientation. This helped position the Houthi domestically as the legitimate defender of 'true' Islamic values.

Proxy dimension 3: The extent of convergence of strategic interests

A final dimension relevant to assessing the relationship between the Houthi and Iran is the extent to which their strategic interests converge over time. Here, this refers to the shared pursuit

of regional objectives that draws the parties closer together. In this case, such objectives are largely geopolitical in nature, but with a sectarian coating. The Houthi objective of reducing Saudi influence in Yemen matched Iran's desire to distract Saudi Arabia from the Levant and, later, to deter the UAE from getting too close to Israel in the wake of the Abraham Accords. Limited Iranian material support was 'exchanged' for a stronger Houthi threat posture towards Saudi Arabia that was, in fact, already in place. Animating such realist objectives with a Shi'a versus Sunni discourse facilitated social mobilisation and legitimised the sacrifices required in times of war.

Nonetheless, the core aim of the Houthi is to regain their previous political authority in Yemen. Fighting Saudi Arabia is a means to an end. Iran has little influence on this objective, which became evident when the Houthi stepped up attacks on Saudi and UAE targets that were not supported by Iran. In a similar vein, Iran has not been very involved in the ceasefire or peace negotiations between the Houthi and the Yemeni government, even though Hezbollah has at times played a role. Briefly put, when the Houthi can strike a deal with Riyadh that is in their interests, they are unlikely to continue the fight for the sake of Iran's regional competition with Saudi Arabia. Rather, the Houthi and Iran are in a kind of 'living-apart-together' relationship.

Conclusion

On balance, the Houthi cannot credibly be viewed as an Iranian proxy in the sense of doing Tehran's bidding, voluntarily or under pressure. Yet, it is reasonable to consider the Houthi as an informal partner of Tehran. This relationship has evolved from a partnership of convenience into a more strategic partnership along the following lines:

- *Iranian support for the Houthi evolved from providing inspiration, a home away from home and experience with social mobilisation methods in the 1990s to also providing material (military) support*

¹³ Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict*, 17.

since about 2014. In other words, there is a long history of immaterial Iranian support for the Houthi that was complemented by a material component after 2014. However, this is not the typical support that characterises a proxy relationship, since the Houthi benefit from, but are not dependent on, Iranian support.

- *Ideological similarities override religious differences.* Even though the Houthi and Tehran have little in common in terms of religious doctrine and each adhere to a different strand of Shi'ism, they nevertheless share the narrative of oppression and resistance against injustice that serves as glue for the 'axis of resistance'. Although the Houthi are a relatively new and junior member of this network, ties with both Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps have strengthened of late.¹⁴
- *The strategic interests of Iran and the Houthi have continued to converge, especially since 2014.* This has taken the form of the common objective of reducing Saudi influence in Yemen and distracting Riyadh from other theatres. An additional Iranian objective is to deter the UAE from associating too closely with Israel and the US. However, ultimately the Houthi aspire to power in Yemen and are unlikely to extend their fight for the sake of Iran's regional agenda.

Despite this evolving partnership, over the years the Houthi have remained autonomous with respect to their domestic constituencies, political strategy and battlefield operations. This raises the question as to whether the Houthi-Iranian association will remain constant going forward. A possible scenario is that the Houthi conclude the conflict once they can achieve either victory or a favourable peace deal based on their *de facto* control of large parts of Yemen. In such a situation, their relations with Iran are likely to revert to a more limited and transactional mode. For the purpose of peacemaking and subsequent efforts to maintain peace, it means that the Houthi should be considered an autonomous, domestically legitimate (at least in part) and capable actor, but that Iran also needs to be consulted behind the scenes as its support for the Houthi has come to matter more than it used to.

To conclude, the Houthi are not an extension of Iranian foreign policy. It is rather the other way around. Since 2014, Iran has been an informal partner of the Houthi in the Yemeni civil war more than the Houthi have been an Iranian proxy. For the time being, the Houthi are supportive of the basic thrust of Iranian foreign policy, namely weakening Saudi Arabia and deterring the UAE from taking on an excessive anti-Iranian posture. In this reframed sense, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were right in their assessment of the Houthi movement as amplifying Iranian foreign policy, especially after 2014.

14 Katherine Zimmerman, *Yemen's Houthis and the Expansion of Iran's Axis of Resistance* (Washington D.C: American Enterprise Institute, 2022), 7, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/yemens-houthis-and-the-expansion-of-irans-axis-of-resistance/>.

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