

# Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen



By Oved Lobel

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## **Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen**

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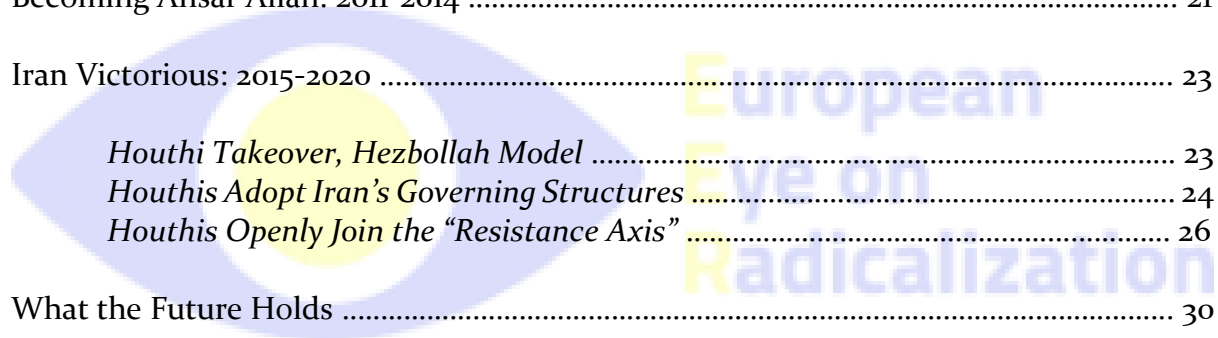
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## Introduction

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In a 2007 telephone interview with the newspaper *Al-Watan al-Araby*, Yahya al-Houthi — one of several sons from the four marriages of Badr al-Din al-Houthi — was asked the following question: “What is your relationship to Iran and is [Ali] Khamenei your supreme guide?” Yahya responded:

I would be honored and hope that there will be a connection to Iran, but there are many who fear the Iranians. And, regretfully, there is no connection between us and them. I say to you that I indeed hope for a connection like that; however there is no connection in terms of *madhab* [school of thought within Islamic jurisprudence], and furthermore, we will resist any interference in our country and will purify our country of the Salafis.<sup>1</sup>

But Yahya al-Houthi was lying, and it is a lie that has skewed analysis on Iran’s relationship with the Houthis and the current conflict in Yemen.

The universal conventional wisdom, even among the more hawkish analysts willing to blame Iran for militia activity elsewhere, is that the Houthis are not a proxy of Iran, but merely a “strategic ally,”<sup>2</sup> more [akin](#) to Iran’s relationship with Hamas than to Hezbollah. The most common refrain spanning the spectrum of analysis is that the ‘Fiver’ Shiism of the Zaydi sect in Yemen — that is, the sect from which the Houthis stem — is so divergent from the more common ‘Twelver’ Shiism practiced in Iran and elsewhere that a proxy relationship based on absolute obedience to the supranational, divine authority of the Supreme Leader of Iran<sup>3</sup> is impossible.<sup>4</sup> Compounding this dismissal of an Iran-Houthi relationship is the rejection of any claims by the government of Yemen about Iran’s meddling since the war with the Houthis first began in 2004, framing it as a cynical ploy to obtain American and Saudi aid. Finally, an obsession with local dynamics and grievances, both tribal and political, have caused analysts to miss the Iranian forest for the Yemeni trees.

The truth is that the entire analytical corpus on the Houthi-Iran relationship, and the general history of the movement, is based on such fragmentary and uncorroborated information as to allow precisely the opposite conclusion to the one conventionally given, particularly in light of Iran’s historical and current behavior shaping proxies throughout the region. The Houthis, in this conception, are not the Zaydis, but are in fact a neo-Twelver core carved out of the Zaydi Revival movement,<sup>5</sup> cultivated since 1979, and acting entirely under Iran’s command and control.

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<sup>1</sup> Abdullah Lux (2009) Yemen’s last Zaydī Imām: the shabāb al-mu’min, the Malāzīm, and ‘hizb allāh’ in the thought of Ḥusayn Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥūthī, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 2:3, 369-434, p. 398

<sup>2</sup> Golkar, S., & Aarabi, K. (2021). *The View From Tehran: Iran’s Militia Doctrine*. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, p.45

<sup>3</sup> *Wilayat al-Faqih* [Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist], the concept popularized by Ayatollah Khomeini that formed the basis of the Islamic Republic and Iran’s former and contemporary relationships with its proxies, essentially making Khomeini and his successors God-kings over all Muslims.

<sup>4</sup> Evidently, these analysts have forgotten that not only have [Sunni groups allied with](#) (and even come under the control of) Iran, but so have communist insurgents and groups like the [Irish Republican Army](#), not to mention Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria.

<sup>5</sup> Much like Iran’s Lebanese and Iraqi proxies were carved out of wider Shia revival movements in the 70s and 80s, such as Musa al-Sadr’s *Harakat al-Mahrumin* (Movement of the Deprived) and its armed wing *Amal* in Lebanon, as well as the *Hezb al-Dawa al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Call Party), a theocratic Shia revolutionary party founded between 1957-1968 in Iraq, as well as its branches in Lebanon and the Gulf states.

While nothing can be definitively proven, the chronology of events we do know, coupled with what can be judged in hindsight as substantive claims by Yemen's former government of Iranian involvement, points to a need to recast the entire narrative. Rather than Iran reacting to events in Yemen and slowly forming an alliance with the Houthis after 2009 in response to Saudi Arabia's overt involvement, there is more than enough evidence — and gaps in the evidence — to assess that Iran has controlled the conflict since the early 2000s, engaging in precisely the same patterns of co-opting local grievances, creating proxies, and orchestrating schisms as has been witnessed in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Iran's 1979 revolution inspired the entire Islamic world, regardless of sect; the relationship with the Houthis goes beyond inspiration. Far from being the tactical Iranian sideshow to undermine Saudi Arabia in reaction to Saudi intervention often portrayed by analysts, the Iranian relationship with the Houthis is in fact Iran's first opportunity since the revolution in 1979 to impose an exact replica of its own theocracy — something it ultimately failed to do in Iraq and Lebanon — and thus the most important battlefield against Iran's attempts to export its revolution today.



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## Planting the Seeds: 1979-1989

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According to a Houthi biography issued in 2007 and 2008, the godfather of the movement, Badr al-Din al-Houthi, among the foremost Zaydi religious authorities, was the target of an assassination attempt in Yemen and fled to Iran in 1979, where he allegedly remained true to his beliefs and heroically resisted attempts to convert him to Iran's 'Twelver' ideology.<sup>6</sup>

This narrative is probably mythical. In fact, Badr al-Din was likely a member of the Zaydi delegation that went to Iran in 1979, and then continued to return and study there throughout the 1980s:

The relationship between the Houthi movement (Ansarallah) and the IRGC dates back to 1979, when leaders of the Yemeni Shias from the Houthi tribe visited Iran to congratulate Khomeini on the creation of an Islamist state. During the 1980s, some Houthi leaders studied Iran's militant brand of Shiism in the Qom seminary in the hope that they could emulate the methods used in Iran's Islamic Revolution at home in Yemen.<sup>7</sup>

In 1982, the year Hezbollah is first recognised officially as an organization in Lebanon, the first Iranian revolutionary movement in Yemen is established by Zaydi scholar Salah Ahmad Flaytih. This movement evolves into The Union of Believing Youth (*Ittihad al-Shabab al-Mu'min*) around 1986, at which stage Badr al-Din returns from exile — presumably from Iran<sup>8</sup> — and becomes deeply involved.<sup>9</sup>

The *Washington Post* reported in 1983 that in North Yemen, "Iranian agents have been helping dissident plotters, and Yemeni exiles in Saudi Arabia have used Iranian diplomats in North Yemen to smuggle out militants and instruction."<sup>10</sup> In 1984, a CIA [overview](#) of Yemen lists known Islamic fundamentalist groups active in North Yemen; among them, "Khomeini supporters: Small but active. Attracts Yemeni Shias who see revolution in Iran as triumph over alien, pro-Western regime."

These reports are clearly referring to Badr al-Din al-Houthi and other Zaydi agents of Iran. One of the senior shaykhs of Khawlan in Yemen, Abdullah Rawkan, began warning of Badr al-Din's activities as soon as he returned in the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> Later, when the Houthi wars of expansion were launched, another shaykh remarked:

In the late 1980s Abdullah Rawkan and some other shaykhs went to Governor Yahya al-Shami and warned him of Badr al-Din al-Huthi and his activities in Marran and Dahyan ... But Yahya al-Shami replied that [Badr al-Din] only studies the Quran, and that he is a good man. Because of Yahya al-Shami's talk, Yemen descended into mayhem and distress.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). (2020). *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. Taylor & Francis Group, p. 161.

<sup>7</sup> Golkar & Aarabi, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Lux claims from Saudi Arabia, p. 376.

<sup>9</sup> According to Riadh Al-Ghaili, Badr al-Din actually [declared](#) himself Khomeini's local equivalent, *al-Wali al-Faqih*, in the 1980s.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, J. (1983, October 16). Khomeini's Agents Abound. *Washington Post*, B7.

<sup>11</sup> Brandt, M. (2017). *Tribes and politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi conflict*. Oxford University Press, p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> Brandt, p. 195.

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## The Believing Youth and Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi: 1990-2000

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Iran has pragmatically controlled its proxies depending on the political environment in any given country, and moves them towards political participation when it seems more beneficial than pursuing pure military conquest. This was the case in Lebanon and Afghanistan in the 1990s, and eventually in Iraq in the 2000s. What happened in Yemen fits this pattern perfectly.

Yemen's unification in the 1990s and subsequent legalisation of political organisations led to the transformation of The Union of Believing Youth into the Assembly of the Believing Youth and the creation of its political wing, Hizb al-Haqq (The Party of Truth). The future leaders of the insurgency, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi — who was considered “the symbol of the party” by Hizb al-Haqq<sup>13</sup> — and one of his best friends and loyalists, Abdullah al-Razzami, would be its representatives<sup>14</sup> in 1993.

During the post-unification Yemeni civil war, Hussein's father, Badr al-Din al-Houthi, returned to Iran, either residing consistently or travelling back and forth to Yemen, as he had during the 1980s, for the better part of the decade. During the 1990s, even while serving as a representative, Hussein and his brother Abdul-Malik — the current leader of the Houthi movement — accompanied their father to Iran.

These trips allegedly involved a tour of Qom and the study of the Islamic Revolution as well as the formation of Hezbollah in Lebanon. According to the Yemeni government:

The importation by [Hussein] al-Huthi of the religious and political beliefs of Twelver Shi'ism into his movement was not odd, on the basis of Twelverism's confluence of views with the Jarudi group of Zaydism, for which his father Badr al-Din al-Huthi was its reference point [marja'] in Yemen.<sup>15</sup>

Alongside family trips to Iran, anonymous Lebanese and Iraqi Shiites began travelling to Yemen to study in Houthi learning centers and establishing Twelver *husayniyas*.<sup>16</sup>

It was during these trips to Iran in the 1990s, [according](#) to Dr. Essam al-Emad, that Hussein developed “deep, cordial relations with the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei” and absorbed all the thoughts of Ruhollah Khomeini, Khamenei, and Secretary-General of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah. Both Hussein and his brother Abdul-Malik settled in Iran's religious center, Qom, where Hussein called for the Islamic Republic and Hezbollah to be the models for Yemen and penned a book entitled “Iran in the Philosophy of Hussein Houthi.” According to Arash Azizi, Hussein travelled to Syria and Iran in the 1990s looking to establish Hezbollah in Yemen — though the Iranians did not yet think the time was ripe.<sup>17</sup> That would come later.

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<sup>13</sup> Salmoni, B. A., Loidolt, B., & Wells, M. (2010). *Regime and periphery in northern Yemen: the Huthi phenomenon*. Rand Corporation., p. 115.

<sup>14</sup> Brandt, p.124.

<sup>15</sup> Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 173-174.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Azizi, A. (2020). *The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, The U.S., and Iran's Global Ambitions*. OneWorld Publications, p. 218

Meanwhile, during the 1990s, the Zaydi revival movement — a response to the spread of various Sunni ideologies with government connivance and Saudi Arabia’s funding — began expanding. The Assembly of Believing Youth, which had been stood up with the help of another Houthi brother, Mohammed, as well as a Houthi associate, Mohammed Izzan, morphed into The Believing Youth in 1992, with its concomitant ‘summer camps’ for indoctrination, which by 1994 were accommodating more than 15,000 students.<sup>18</sup> According to Riyadh Al-Ghaili, the elder Houthi had already [precipitated](#) a schism in the Zaydi revival movement by explicitly preaching Khomeinism:

With the reestablishment of unity between the two parts of Yemen, northern and southern Yemen, in 1990, Badr al-Din al-Houthi instructed his eldest son (Mohamed) to establish the Youth Believers Forum along with one of his students (Mohamed Salem Azzan) ... The new organization was able to circulate the Twelver ideology (*Ithna’ashariyya*) — that the eldest Houthi (Badr al-Din al-Houthi) dreamed to promote in the Zaidi areas since a long time — within seven years from 1990 to 1997. The Houthi movement managed to establish their first cultural camp in the city of Saada, the most zealous governorate for the Zaidi belief and its cultural and intellectual stronghold. This move aroused the anger of the political *Hashimiyya*<sup>19</sup> that saw this organization as a danger to its existence because it is based on the theory of Khomeini called “Wilayat al-Faqih”.<sup>20</sup>

The Believing Youth was explicitly modelled on identical, eponymous organisations in Lebanon and Iran that became the primary component of Hezbollah.<sup>21</sup> According to Hassan Zaid — the leader of Hizb al-Haqq, who would go on to become the Houthi Minister For Youth and Sports until his assassination in [dubious circumstances](#) in 2020 — the group was established by the aforementioned Mohammed Izzan and another Houthi associate, Abdul-Karim Jadban; both had deep connections with “prominent Shia leaders in Iran and Lebanon.”<sup>22</sup> Izzan travelled often to Beirut during the 1990s, allegedly in his capacity as a “Zaydi book editor and purchaser,”<sup>23</sup> where Hezbollah almost certainly guided him through transplanting their model to Yemen.

At the very least, [according](#) to Zaid:

The two leaders [Izzan and Jadban] provided materials, especially videos, for the summer religious centres in Saada. The materials included lectures by Mohammed Hussein Fadhlallah [considered to be the spiritual godfather of Hezbollah] and Hassan Nasrallah [Hezbollah’s Secretary-General].

<sup>18</sup> Brandt, pp. 116-117.

<sup>19</sup> Hashemite, or *sayyid*, refers to a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed via ‘Ali and Fatima. Some analysts frame Ansar Allah’s regime as the [institutionalization](#) of Hashemite rule; however, that is more likely a byproduct of the fact that the Houthis are Hashemites rather than a goal *per se*. The more fundamental goal is the establishment of a clerical regime, many members of which happen to be Hashemites, loyal and subservient to Iran.

<sup>20</sup> Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> Lux, p. 374, p. 430.

<sup>22</sup> Freeman, J. (2009). The al Houthi insurgency in the North of Yemen: An analysis of the Shabab al Moumineen. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32(11), pp. 1008-1019., pp. 1008-1009.

<sup>23</sup> Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 97.



Izzan would ultimately be arrested by the Yemeni government after returning from a trip to Lebanon and Iran and forced out of the picture before the Believing Youth's armed wing, led by Hussein al-Houthi, was activated by Iran in the 2000s.<sup>24</sup>

It is clear that all was not as it seemed when it comes to the ostensibly Zaydi revival movement, and that it was hijacked almost immediately by Iran's cultivated agents among the Houthi family and their associates, who established a multifaceted basis to prepare for the Islamic Revolution, with social welfare, political, and military wings, the latter kept dormant until the 2000s.



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<sup>24</sup> Lux, p. 377.

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## The Iran-orchestrated Schism in the Believing Youth and Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi: 2000-2003

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Hussein al-Houthi begins travelling back and forth between Iran and Sudan in the 1990s, allegedly to further his religious education,<sup>25</sup> and is said to have studied for his master's degree in Quranic Sciences in Khartoum from 1999 to 2000.<sup>26</sup>

It is quite stunning that these facts are merely mentioned as an aside by most analysts. Whether Hussein was actually studying for his master's in Khartoum, much less received his degree, is irrelevant; at this time, Sudan was the forward operating base of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Hundreds of IRGC and Hezbollah agents, as well as operatives from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS), [trained](#) not only Sudan's own military and "Popular Defense Forces," but also the entire spectrum of Islamic militant groups, from Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas to Al-Qaeda.

The chances that Hussein — and likely other Houthis and associates — was not receiving both orders and training from Iranian operatives in Sudan and Iran itself, and being subsumed into the nexus of Iranian proxies and allies, are essentially zero, especially given what happens next.

Immediately upon his return to Yemen, Hussein, almost certainly at Iran's behest, orchestrates an official factional split, already in the works since 1996, in the Believing Youth.<sup>27</sup> Hussein's faction takes the name *Ashab al-Shiar*, or Followers of the Slogan. The slogan in question — the Houthi motto of today — is an expanded version of Iran's own: "God is Great! Death to America! Death to Israel! A Curse Upon the Jews! Victory to Islam!"

An examination of Hussein's lectures after his return in 2000 reveals an absolute obsession with Iran's first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, as well as his successor Ali Khamenei and Hezbollah's Nasrallah — and all he really cares about is fighting the U.S. and Israel. While Abdullah Lux goes out of his way to assert that there is no sign of pure Iranian Twelver ideology being promoted, even he finds it hard to pin down exactly what Hussein believes, stating that "while Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi remained a Jarudi Zaydi, he had — in various other ways — 'transcended' the *madhab* — or perhaps any *madhab*."<sup>28</sup>

A 2005 cable from the U.S. embassy in Yemen [refers](#) to Hussein's ideology as "homemade' twelver Shia":

Al-Houthi's teachings can be described as "homemade" twelver Shia, the mainstream Shia found in Iran and throughout the Middle East. Al-Houthi studied at the Badr Religious Center, founded with [Yemeni president Ali Abdullah] Saleh's tacit endorsement by Yemeni theologian al-Hatwari in

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<sup>25</sup> Johnston, T. et al (2020). *Could the Houthis Be the Next Hizballah Iranian Proxy Development in Yemen and the Future of the Houthi Movement*. RAND Corporation Santa Monica United States., p. 54.

<sup>26</sup> Brandt, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> Lux, p. 377.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

1997. Hatwari taught the twelver brand of Shia, elements of which al-Houthi took back to followers in Saada.

Incidentally, “Al-Hatwari” in the U.S. cable almost certainly refers to Al-Murtada bin Zayd al-Mahatwari, who was killed in a [2015 Islamic State \(ISIS\) attack](#) on the Badr mosque, where [he was the prayer leader](#). Al-Mahatwari had been one of the key activists in the so-called Zaydi revival in the 1990s alongside Izzan.<sup>29</sup>

Izzan, who continued running the other faction of the Believing Youth, was extremely perturbed by Hussein’s preaching in the 2000s:

We took a look at these *Malazim* [lecture notes] and found in them much which we had never read and with which we did not agree, which impelled us to issue a communiqué and to attempt to block and isolate him as he did not represent us and we did not support him or bear responsibility for him or his followers.<sup>30</sup>

Izzan found that not only were Ja’afari (Twelver) concepts incorporated by Hussein,<sup>31</sup> but that he was warping Zaydi (Fiver) concepts.<sup>32</sup> Whatever Hussein was preaching, it was not Zaydi revivalism.

What Hussein was doing was creating space for the Iranian ideas by promoting a Pan-Islamic ideology, which contained elements of both Fiver and Twelver Shiism. Marieke Brandt points out that “the overarching religious referent wielded by Husayn ..., far from being strictly Zaydi, appeared at first sight to be pan-Islamic”.<sup>33</sup> Lux agrees, writing:

At a certain level al-Huthi does *not* represent Shiism or even Zaydism and, at times, appears to have been in the early stages of constructing an Islamic discourse that transcended Sunni-Shi’i dichotomies as well as the bounds of traditional Zaydi thought. There is, in the *Malazim*, despite its various invectives, an appeal to a *universal* Islam.<sup>34</sup>

There was a broad Zaydi backlash against the rise of the *Ashab al-Shiar* faction of the Believing youth. Even Hussein’s oldest son, Abdullah, criticized the group, calling on them “to lay down their arms and desist from threatening Yemeni unity, religious freedom, and the lives of Zaydis”.<sup>35</sup> Brandt quotes one Zaydi shaykh, who dubs this new ideology “Houthiism” and rejects its connection to Zaydi Shiism:

We in Saada knew nothing of the differences between sects until the *Hutha* showed up. The Houthis claim that the government is preventing them from practicing their Zaydi *maddhab*, but that’s not true ... we are all Zaydis, no

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<sup>29</sup> Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> Lux, p. 377.

<sup>31</sup> Izzan himself would have a *fatwa* issued against him for being anti-Zaydi by one of the foremost Zaydi scholars of the day, Majid al-Din al-Mu’ayyadi, who attempted to excommunicate the Believing Youth. See, Brandt, p. 118

<sup>32</sup> Brandt, p. 132.

<sup>33</sup> Brandt, p. 134.

<sup>34</sup> Lux, p. 426.

<sup>35</sup> Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 173.

one has prevented us from practicing our Zaydi *maddhab*. The Houthis themselves are the ones who are a threat to the Zaydi *maddhab*.<sup>36</sup>

An interesting parallel to this concept of creating social space for Iran's ideas and ultimately leadership is Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and its leader, Fathi al-Shiqaqi. A Sunni Muslim Brotherhood member, Shiqaqi, like all Muslims, was inspired by Iran's 1979 revolution and wrote a book that year entitled "Khomeini: The Islamic Solution and the Alternative." Shiqaqi couldn't preach Ja'afari Shiism to his radical Sunni followers — he could, however, promote Khomeini's pan-Islamic ideology that would negate the differences.<sup>37</sup> As Sudan was one of main PIJ safe havens at this time, it is not at all unlikely that Hussein encountered Shiqaqi and other Islamic Jihad operatives.<sup>38</sup>

Like Shiqaqi, Hussein also wrote a book incorporating Khomeini's ideology into his own, realizing that the only way to spread Iran's ideology was through championing a pan-Islamic ideology revolving around the Palestinian cause, eradicating Israel, and attacking the United States. This is also how Hezbollah managed to [recruit](#) Sunnis and others to its cause — minimizing doctrinal differences and leveraging widespread, conspiratorial hatred of Israel and America as a binding agent.<sup>39</sup>

Although Shia chauvinism asserted itself, Khomeini's revolution was billed as ecumenical and pan-Islamic<sup>40</sup> in order to export the revolution and assert control or influence over the entire Muslim world, not merely the Shia.<sup>41</sup> An interview with Khomeini's grandson, Hussein, in 1979 emphasised this point:

The revolution is Islamic and its leader said he sees no differences between the doctrines. The doctrinal questions are made up by colonialism to weaken us. The Islamic Revolution cannot grant others total freedom to apply any one of the doctrines in the areas of the law, prayer, and civil status in accordance with the numerical majority in any one of the areas. Discussion about the al Ja'fari Doctrine is due to the fact that most of the Iranians are al Ja'fari. But this does not mean any doctrinal coercion.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, even if The Believing Youth had been part of a genuine Zaydi revival, that would be no obstacle to subordinating itself to Iran's Supreme Leader; but, as demonstrated above, it most certainly was not a Zaydi revival movement.

<sup>36</sup> Brandt, p. 145.

<sup>37</sup> See Hatina, M. (2001). *Islam and salvation in Palestine: the Islamic Jihad movement* (Vol. 127). Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

<sup>38</sup> The first [official meeting](#) between the Houthis and Palestinian Islamic Jihad would take place in 2014 as Iran sought to officially bind the Houthis into its overall web of regional proxies.

<sup>39</sup> Hezbollah's founding ideology, as a clone and component of Khomeini's IRGC, was explicitly pan-Islamic and expansionist. See Ranstorp, M. (1996). *Hizb'allah in Lebanon: the politics of the western hostage crisis*. Springer, pp. 49-58.

<sup>40</sup> Khomeini's personal representative in Pakistan Arif Hussain al Hussaini, who'd befriended him in Najaf in the mid-1970s, also pushed pan-Islamism: "We say, let the Sunnis as well as the Shiites live in Pakistan, let the Ahle Hadith and Deobandi, all of them, live together. They should recognise each other, should love one another, and should not be narrow-minded. One of the objectives of our movement is to strive for an Islam that is above sectarianism." See Lodhi, M. (1988). Pakistan's Shia movement: an interview with Arif Hussaini. *Third World Quarterly*, 10(2), 806-817, p. 807.

<sup>41</sup> Even such radical Sunni Islamists as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Afghanistan remained loyal to Iran.

<sup>42</sup> (November 5-11, 1979). Khomeyni's Grandson Speaks Out on Arab Issues. *Al-Dustur*, p. 23; included in JPRS 74767 (December 13, 1979), p. 8.

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## Iran unleashes the Believing Youth: 2004-2010

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### *Iranian Policy in the Shadow of 9/11*

The September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks and the subsequent overthrow of the Taliban and Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein were a watershed for Iran, overlapping as these events did with the second *intifada* in Israel. All of the IRGC's proxies and allies across the region were activated in the 2000s, from the Palestinian terrorist organisations and Hezbollah to loyalist Iraqi Shiite militias against coalition forces.

And the Iranians did not only rely on Shia forces to destabilise the American project in Iraq. Drawing on Iran's [long-standing partnership](#) with and support of Al-Qaeda from the early 1990s, Tehran abetted the activities of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi<sup>43</sup> — whose “Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia” group later evolved into ISIS — and provided [shelter](#) to Al-Qaeda's leadership from the Americans, even as Osama bin Laden's group continued its attacks against Western targets and allies.<sup>44</sup>

Following the U.S. declaration of war against transnational jihadists and any state that supported them, the long-time ruler and President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, planted himself firmly in the U.S. camp and began cooperating against Al-Qaeda's Yemen-based branch, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Iran, therefore, activated the Believing Youth to undermine the campaign against AQAP and pressure a U.S. ally while simultaneously avenging itself against Saleh, a staunch [supporter](#) and [protégé](#) of Iran's arch-nemesis Saddam Hussein.

Saleh himself [told](#) the *New York Times* in 2008:

They [Iran] support them [Houthis] ... Just as they support Hassan Nasrallah ... And also to settle scores with the U.S.A. Of course Iran cannot reach the U.S.A, so they settle scores with the U.S.A in other countries, whether in Arab nations like Yemen, or otherwise.

According to Yemen's government, as soon as Hussein al-Houthi returned from his trips to Iran and Sudan, the *Ashab al-Shiar* began training, arming, and stockpiling weapons. The activities of Hussein's faction also became much more sinister starting in 1999, involving:

nightly meetings of groups of youths under the stewardship of Husayn and his colleagues, which would “follow a Karbalesque manner in their character.” Such practices involved viewing Iranian films about an historically imagined ‘Ali and Husayn, as well as films from the Iranian

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<sup>43</sup> Zarqawi was briefly detained as he crossed Iran from Afghanistan to Iraq in mid-2002; when he was released, he had a “Swiss satellite phone (supplied by the Quds Force) and two Iranian numbers registered in Isfahan” to call for help. See: Levy, A. & Scott-Clark, C. (2018). *The Exile: The Flight of Osama bin Laden*. Bloomsbury Publishing, p. 219.

<sup>44</sup> Among others, Al-Qaeda orchestrated the 2003 bombings in Casablanca and Riyadh from Iran. The de facto leader of the Iranian Al-Qaeda network, Sayf al-Adel, was not in any doubt about the Iranian position: “[Head of the Qods Force] General [Qassem] Suleimani had made it clear on more than one occasion that Iran was ready to help if it, too, benefited”. Levy & Scott-Clark, p. 457.

revolution and Hizbullah and the worship of death as a higher value than charitable living.<sup>45</sup>

Marieke Brandt notes that “anecdotal evidence of such activities [stockpiling weapons and preparing fortifications] was abundant in the Sa’dah region.” One shaykh cited recalls:

In the years leading up to the war, the Houthis had dug trenches in Marran and Dahyan, and also in other areas. And when we asked what they were doing there, they said they would search for ‘ancient treasures.’ We also asked them this when they were digging in the Hikmi mountains in Marran, because there were no treasures there. They replied that they were digging cisterns for the people in Marran, for drinking water. But they were never used as cisterns. This became clear to us from the first to the third war. These ‘cisterns’ were their main hideouts and weapons storages.<sup>46</sup>

Brandt also writes that the governor of Saada, touring the regions, noticed that the government had effectively lost control. The Believing Youth controlled the checkpoints and many of the schools and mosques, and Hussein had commanded his followers not to pay *zakat* (Islamic tax) to local authorities.<sup>47</sup>

Guided step-by-step by Iran and Hezbollah in implementing their revolutionary model throughout the 1990s, Hussein had built up an insurgent base through his social welfare and political activities. After building fortifications and arming and training his *Ashab al-Shiar* cult from 1999 to 2004, Hussein was ready and merely awaiting orders.

Hussein set his followers chanting the slogan in more and more mosques and areas with the specific intent to provoke security incidents to justify the launch of his war, culminating in the harassment of Saleh himself during a mosque visit in Saada. Saleh had begged and threatened Hussein and his family to stop chanting the slogan.<sup>48</sup>

### ***The Houthis’ War: No Local Matter***

Despite the *ad nauseum* repetition of the narrative that the Believing Youth (Houthis) were brought to war in June 2004 by local grievances, particularly around defending Zaydi practices from the encroachments of Salafism, the available evidence makes this easy to dismiss out of hand. One need only cite Hussein al-Houthi himself, who wrote a letter right before hostilities commenced, in response to Saleh’s demand that Hussein come to the capital and cease his insurrectionary preparations, in which Hussein said:

I do not work against you, I appreciate you and what you do tremendously, but what I do is my solemn national duty against the enemy of Islam: America and Israel. I am by your side, so do not listen to hypocrites and

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<sup>45</sup> Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 173-174.

<sup>46</sup> Brandt, p. 156.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Brandt, pp. 137-138.

provocateurs, and trust that I am more sincere and honest to you than they are.<sup>49</sup>

Another dead giveaway that the conflict had absolutely nothing to do with domestic grievances was the Believing Youth's [ethnic cleansing](#) of the small Jewish community in their areas of control in 2007. The conspiratorial and religious hatred of Jews is such a core part of the Believing Youth ideology that, as recently as 2020, one Houthi official [said](#):

We should leave behind the disintegration of our religion, and unite in a rank that pits us directly against our enemies, the Jews. ... The only path is the path to Jerusalem, the path of Jihad against the Jews. This is the path that will sort out all the other movements and guide them in one direction — the direction of enmity towards the Jews. Enmity towards them is the number one criterion for the believing [Muslims]. Tell me who your enemy is and I will tell you who you are. If the Jews are your number one enemy, then you are a believing [Muslim] ... That virus that has spread all over the world — the Jews are behind it.

Often discussed as separate wars, the six wars between the Believing Youth and the Yemeni government from 2004 to 2010 were in fact a single, phased insurgency to put pressure on a U.S. ally, undermine the “global war on terrorism,” and ultimately conquer Yemen and annex it to the borderless realm of Iran’s Supreme Leader’s divine mandate.<sup>50</sup> While there are several [excellent accounts](#) of the military aspects of this war, military analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, which deals specifically with Iranian involvement in creating and controlling the insurgency.

Iran had several means of remote controlling the insurgency. In the first place, Iran was able to coordinate the insurgency via its embassy in Sana’a. Matthew Levitt, an expert on Iranian terrorism at the *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, has described in depth how Iran’s “deadly diplomats” are able to [coordinate](#) terrorist attacks and assassinations across the world, most recently in a [thwarted](#) attack in France against a Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) convention near Paris in 2018. One of the primary overseers of the operation was an MOIS agent under diplomatic cover at Iran’s Austrian embassy.

There is no doubt the Iranian embassy in Yemen played an important role in guiding the Believing Youth insurgency. For example, in 2013, Iran’s ambassador Mahmoud

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<sup>49</sup> Brandt, p. 138.

<sup>50</sup> It is useful to think of the Houthis as Yemen’s Taliban. The parallels are overwhelming in terms of their respective conquests and goals, as well as their being technically local groups, while being operated by foreign intelligence services. In Afghanistan, the Taliban, controlled and aided by Pakistan’s Inter-services Intelligence (ISI), launched a phased insurgency that involved tactical, temporary alliances that played off personal, ethnic, and tribal divisions, as well as weaponizing the brutality and incompetence of the government and its external backers — making their *jihad* to establish a brutal theocracy tolerable to local populations sick of the chaos. The Houthis, controlled and aided by the IRGC, launched their insurgency, which they also consider a *jihad*, to establish an Islamic State, and deftly maneuvered among Yemen’s tribes, clans, and personalities, [accruing](#) fluid, tactical allies, thanks in part to the incompetence and brutality of the Yemeni government. Both the Houthis and the Taliban were essentially invited into the capitals they conquered utilizing these tactical, short-term alliances with armed elements inside the city, though these relationships always wind up in betrayal by one or both sides. Once it establishes itself in an area, the Houthis, like the Taliban, engage in the most horrific coercive control of the population. As Michael Knights [explains](#): “extraordinary ruthlessness and brutality was frequently employed by the Houthi movement to punish pro-government tribes, notably the execution of sheikhs, beheading of captives, display of bodies in public places, execution of children from offending families, and the ancient tradition of hostage-taking to ensure compliance.”

Hassan Alizadeh would be forced to unconvincingly [deny](#) reports that Iran had been running a massive espionage ring in Yemen since the early 2000s.

In fact, in 2005, Yahya Hussein al-Duleimi was [sentenced](#) to death for exactly this. The judge noted that:

Al-Duleimi was contacting Iran's ambassador and asked him to support the "Sanaa youth organization" and traveled to Iran and contacted the Iranian state to support his brother in Yemen to carry out an Islamic revolution, and took a group to train them and provide them with books, references and draw [up] a policy for their organization.<sup>51</sup>

Atop the Iranian use of its embassy in Yemen, the U.S. [reported](#) in 2009 that the Yemeni government used to issue visas to Iranians for Hajj, the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, but had halted this practice "some time ago because the ROYG [Republic of Yemen Government] was uncomfortable about Iranians traveling through Sa'ada into Saudi Arabia." There is little doubt among those travelling through Houthi territory in the 2000s were IRGC and MOIS agents helping to supervise the insurgency, transferring instructions, expertise, funds, and potentially explosives.

Furthermore, the U.S. embassy also reported on Iran's control of a hospital in Sana'a. One can only speculate, but given the well-documented [precedent](#) of Cuba's coercive use of its medical personnel abroad, it is more than likely that these hospitals served as Iranian headquarters and influence points, as well. Yemen's government was so concerned over this that they [shut](#) the hospital down in 2009.

### ***The Qaddafi Connection***

A further avenue of influence and control may have been Libya. In 2007, Yemen [recalled](#) its ambassadors from both Libya and Iran over support for the Houthis. Once again, it is difficult to verify the allegation itself, much less that erratic Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi was coordinating this support with Iran. However, it is extremely unlikely, given past cooperation between the Islamic Republic and Qaddafi, including during the Revolution in Iran itself, that the support was not coordinated.<sup>52</sup>

What is known is that Qaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, explored mediation possibilities in 2006. Simultaneously, Yahya al-Houthi travelled to Libya to consult with Qaddafi and his military intelligence chief Abdullah al-Sanusi. Saleh demanded Qaddafi extradite Yahya to face justice for the insurgency, but the latter refused, and even dispatched Libya's ambassador to Houthi territory in early 2007. Qaddafi, it seems, had been doling out tens of millions of dollars to the Houthis and their associates, including Yemen's notorious arms dealer Fares Mana'a, who allegedly [provided](#) the Houthis with cash and weapons.

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<sup>51</sup> Both al-Duleimi and another convicted cleric, Muhammad Ahmad Miftah, were reportedly pardoned and released as part of a broader and ultimately fruitless amnesty gesture by Saleh to the Houthis in May 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Since the 1979 revolution, Qaddafi and Khomeini had worked arm in arm as part of the "radical axis" to destabilize the Middle East and North Africa and conduct transnational terrorism against the U.S. and Israel. Iran even reportedly contracted operations out to Qaddafi, including the capture and murder of Lebanon's Imam Musa al-Sadr. This romance came to a tragic end in 2011, with Iran ultimately celebrating Qaddafi's overthrow.



One diplomatic source cited by Brandt said: “I’m pretty sure Yahya al-Huthi received a gift also but had no intention of doing Gaddafi any favours, but the Houthis were looking for financing anywhere they could. At the time, Iran was not yet a patron.”<sup>53</sup> On the contrary, Qaddafi was almost certainly an Iranian conduit, as in times long past. Yahya al-Houthi, incidentally, would be [tried in absentia](#) in 2009 for spying for a foreign country — that is, Iran.

### *The West Refuses to See Iran in Yemen*

In April 2005, Yemen’s Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Qirbi met with the U.S. ambassador and [begged](#) him for U.S. support to contain the Houthis:

Qirbi asked Ambassador for staunch U.S.G [U.S. government] support for the ROYG-side of the al-Houthi battle. On the political level, Qirbi said, “there is no doubt” that the Believing Youth are a terrorist organization — “they used terrorist tactics and they have outside financial support (re: Iran and Lebanese Hisbollah)” ... Qirbi ... stressed the need for the U.S.G to strengthen military and political support for the ROYG in this fight quickly, before “others take advantage of the fact that our security forces are overstretched in Saada.” ***Qirbi also asked for U.S. terrorist-financing assistance to isolate the source and stop the flow of funds to al-Houthi followers from abroad*** [emphasis added].

In 2007, Saleh and his officials again desperately pressed U.S. officials to aid the government against the Believing Youth, [explaining](#), to no avail, how intimately linked Iran was to the conflict:

Political Security Organization Director Ali al-Qamish explained, “We believe the al-Houthi problem comes directly from Iran.” The Iranian regime wants influence in the region by working through groups that are ideologically sympathetic, he said, in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. Iran began culturally preparing Yemenis in Saada in the 1990s, and are now hoping to replace the Government in Saada, and perhaps all of Yemen. ... ***The al-Houthis, Qamish continued, depend on Iran as their “main funding source,” as well as individuals from Bahrain, Qatar and elsewhere*** who “share their belief in twelver Islam” [emphasis added]. ...

Minister Alimi asserted that the al-Houthis “have plans to hit Saudi oil facilities” ... “We warned you two and a half years ago that a Taliban-like regime was forming in Somalia [under the Islamic Courts Union that eventually gave way to Al-Qaeda’s Al-Shabab], but you did not listen to us,” Alimi stated. “We are warning you again about the al-Houthis, and you must act.” ...

For President Saleh and his senior security team, the al-Houthis’ educational and religious links to Iran and Tehran’s meddling in other countries in the region appear to be enough to convince them that an Iranian hand is behind

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<sup>53</sup> Brandt, pp.208-210.

the current phase of the al-Houthi insurrection, which has been going on for the past three years. Based on the information the Yemenis have provided thus far, however, Embassy is not ready to make that leap of faith.

The Yemeni government incessantly implored the U.S. for aid as the insurgency escalated and told any U.S. official that would listen about Iran's involvement. In 2008, the same Rashad al-Alimi, a senior Yemeni official, was back again, claiming: "The Believing Youth received sabotage training courses in Iran and they came to implement this in Yemen", adding that they were "formed, with Iranian support, to carry out terrorist acts."<sup>54</sup> It made no difference. The Americans' scepticism about an Iranian connection to the Believing Youth insurrection was total, despite the Americans being aware that they had something less than a solid basis for this viewpoint.

For example, a [diplomatic cable](#) from 2009 admits "significant gaps" in U.S. knowledge of Iranian activities in Yemen, but then nonetheless goes on to dismiss all information pointing to a significant Iranian hand in the Houthi revolt:

President Saleh told General Petraeus in a July 26 meeting that the National Security Bureau (NSB) had a DVD showing Houthi rebels training with Hizballah uniforms and tactics. (Note: In a follow-up conversation, NSB Deputy Director Ammar Saleh claimed no knowledge of the DVD. End Note). ... NSB Director Ali Mohammed al-Ansi claimed that the ROYG had arrested two separate "networks" of Iranians in Yemen on charges of espionage in connection with the Houthis and that one of the accused admitted to providing \$100,000 every month to the Houthis on behalf of the Iranian government. ...

Media reports on August 22 cited ROYG officials claiming to have uncovered six storehouses of Houthi-owned, Iranian-made weapons (including machine guns, short range rockets and ammunition) near Sa'ada City. In an August 25 meeting, however, Ministry of Defense Chief of Staff Major General Ahmed al-Ashwal told the OMC Chief that a limited number of weapons "of Iranian manufacture" were found in the area. ...

GRPO reporting confirms ***ROYG refusals to allow Iranian vessels access to Aden harbor, reportedly over ROYG concern that Iran was using Eritrea to ship weapons to the Houthis.*** ... The general consensus among civil society is that Iranian government influence in Sa'ada is minimal, but ***the Houthis might receive some financial support from Iranian groups or individuals.*** ... NDI's Deputy Country Director Murad Zafir speculated that Iranian groups are likely giving money to the Houthis, but he does not know to what extent. With that money, the Houthis buy weapons from corrupt elements of the Yemeni armed forces that sell weapons and munitions. ... Ambassador Radhi, however, told the DCM on August 23 that he believes there is ***a lot of "coordination on Yemen" between Qom and Najaf, with 40-50 Yemenis studying Islam in Najaf, and some (NFI) studying in Qom as well*** [emphasis added].

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<sup>54</sup> Freeman, p. 1014.

Another [stunningly ignorant](#) cable from the U.S. embassy, which was dispatched a couple of months later and mischaracterized the Believing Youth and every other aspect of the conflict, contains the following claims from Yemeni officials:

Ministry of Defense Chief of Staff Major General Ahmed al-Ashwal told PolOff on September 14 that the Houthis “are the same as Iran, the same as Hizballah; they share the same doctrine and ideology.” Foreign Minister Abubakr al-Qirbi told the Ambassador on September 7 that the Houthis clearly were not fighting for political grievances as they had failed to delineate what they want from the ROYG, but were instead fighting for a vague and radical ideology. ... On October 6, Faris al-Saqqaf, director of the local think tank Center for Future Studies and confidante of President Saleh’s son Ahmed Ali, told PolOff, ***“It is easy for Yemenis to travel to Damascus; they don’t even need a visa. From there, the Houthis go to Lebanon for Hizballah training, this is for sure. Maybe they even go to Iran, but definitely to Lebanon.”***<sup>55</sup> [emphasis added]

In October 2009,<sup>56</sup> the Yemeni government intercepted two large weapons shipments, one aboard the Iranian vessel *Mahan I* that was undoubtedly intended for the Houthis; the other, a large consignment of weapons to Fares Mana’a, was also reportedly destined for the Houthis.<sup>57</sup> A confidential United Nations (U.N.) report would [verify](#) that Iran had been arming the Houthis “since at least 2009.” Another 2014 U.N. report would verify the Yemeni government’s earlier fear of Iran [utilizing](#) islands off Eritrea for both training and arming the Houthis. In 2011, Kuwaiti Professor Abdallah Nafisi [asserted](#) that Eritrea leased Islands to Iran for these purposes, claiming: “The IRGC uses them as training camps for the Houthis and for young Shiites from the Gulf states. The IRGC has three offices in Asmara in order to manage these affairs.” Iran also [stationed](#) an intelligence-gathering ship off the coast of these islands in 2009.

While not every report of Iranian support can be verified in its specifics, it is very clear that Iran, far from responding to the overt Saudi intervention in 2009, had been involved at every level beginning decades earlier, and that it was the Saudis responding to Iran’s stalking horse taking territory, including in Saudi Arabia itself. The Saudi navy also attempted to impose a blockade<sup>58</sup> against ships smuggling weapons not only from Eritrea, but Somalia. One Western intelligence source [commented](#):

The Saudis are in a panic mode and don’t have the troops or capabilities to stop the Yemeni Shi’ites. ... The Saudi air force has been heavily bombing villages inside Yemen, but this has not made a dent in the capabilities of the Shi’ite rebels. They have been well-trained by Iran and Hizbullah and have moved steadily north in Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>55</sup> Yemenis are specifically mentioned as a student cohort at the Ruqqaya Institute in Syria, which is funded by Iran and Hezbollah and used to recruit fighters from among the 5,000 or more foreign Shia students. See Alrifai, O. A. (2021). *In the Service of Ideology: Iran’s Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria* (No. 100), Washington Institute For Near East Policy, p. 12. Yemenis are also cited as among the fighters that as early as 2012 engaged in ethnically cleansing Sunnis from areas in Syria in order to alter demographics by settling Shia families and fighters in their place. See: *ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> In September 2009, wily Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr reportedly attempted to involve himself in the conflict as a mediator. See Brandt, p. 319. This was almost certainly an Iranian ploy, given that al-Sadr was mostly in Iran during this period on a tight leash.

<sup>57</sup> Brandt, p. 315.

<sup>58</sup> See also Brandt, pp. 309-311

Yet analysts and diplomats, even the ones admitting Iranian involvement, remained completely sceptical. One analyst even [wrote](#) in 2010:

The Iranian government and state media have been supportive of the Houthis, and it is likely that some private Iranians have informally funded the insurgency ... Some low-level representatives from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security or Revolutionary Guards might have meddled in Saada in an ad hoc fashion; however, such interference is neither official nor sustained.<sup>59</sup>

The implausible lengths observers went to in order to make the facts fit the theory of minimal Iranian involvement with the Houthis were extraordinary. Thus, Iran's open support for Houthis, as in its state media noted above, was taken to show not that Tehran was so confident in its protégé's cause that it would even advocate it in public; rather, it was argued, this showed that Iran's support was *only* rhetorical. Likewise, in 2004, almost immediately after the start of the insurgency, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi could be killed and a street could be [named](#) after him in Tehran, and those analysts who troubled to mention this fact could play it off as a mere rhetorical gambit, instead of an indication of something concrete.



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<sup>59</sup> It's unclear on what basis the theory of "rogue IRGC" persists, but it has poisoned analysis of Iran's activities and relationship to its proxies since the 1980s. If MOIS and IRGC operatives were present, then that interference was very much official and most certainly sustained.

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## Becoming Ansar Allah: 2011-2014

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“Hajj Qassem [Soleimani] knew a lot about Yemen. He always spoke about all that we could do there. I mean even before 2011,” one IRGC Qods Force operative told Arash Azizi.<sup>60</sup> Soleimani was, until he was killed by an American drone in Baghdad in January 2020, the leader of the Qods Force, the nominal IRGC unit charged with external operations to export the Islamic Revolution.

The so-called “Arab Spring” protests sweeping the Middle East caused yet another regional upheaval akin to 9/11 and the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the broader global war on terror. Coinciding with the full U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and very sympathetic gestures from the Obama administration, Iran decided the time was finally right to officially establish Hezbollah in Yemen,<sup>61</sup> as Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi had wanted to do in the 1990s.

Unfortunately, the name “Hezbollah” was already taken, so the Believing Youth and their IRGC masters did the next best thing — they took on the name of the “clandestine subgroup of Hezbollah” [established](#) in 1982 and used to claim joint IRGC-Hezbollah attacks against Jews in South America<sup>62</sup>: *Ansar Allah* (The Partisans of God).<sup>63</sup>

One may begin to notice a pattern of the Houthis self-consciously following, step by step, the development of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the most successful transplant of the Iranian Revolution’s model, including using the exact same names at every evolutionary stage of the organization, guided throughout by Hezbollah itself. In this vein, the official Ansar Allah television station, *Al-Masirah*, was [established](#) in Beirut in January 2012, “located next to Hezbollah’s *Al-Manar* TV with backup studios at Hezbollah headquarters.”

Reports of IRGC and Hezbollah interference begin pouring in between 2011 and 2014, when Ansar Allah marched into Yemen’s capital with the aid of Saleh — who technically resigned in 2011 due to protests — and his loyalists in the army. In January 2013, the *Jihan-1*, an Iranian ship bearing not only sophisticated Iranian arms and explosives, but also Houthis covertly reinfiltrating back into Yemen after training in Iran and elsewhere, was [intercepted](#) off Yemen’s coast. The first act of Ansar Allah upon entering Yemen’s capital in September 2014 was to free everyone involved in the incident, “including eight Yemeni crew members, two Hezbollah members and three IRGC personnel”.<sup>64</sup>

In March 2013, Lebanese MP Khaled Dhaher [claimed](#):

The South Yemen Movement<sup>65</sup> has the support of Iran and Hizbullah, and they train in Lebanon. Their Aden Live TV channel broadcasts from an

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<sup>60</sup> Azizi, p. 218

<sup>61</sup> It also [unveiled](#) its proxies in Bahrain around this time.

<sup>62</sup> One group of Believing Youth began calling themselves ‘Ansar Allah in al-Jawf’ already in early 2006. See Brandt, p. 188.

<sup>63</sup> For example, the AMIA bombing and the bombing of Alas Chiricanas Flight 00901 over Panama in 1994.

<sup>64</sup> S/2015/125. *Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council Committee resolution 2140 (2014)*, p. 38.

<sup>65</sup> Rumors and claims of Iranian connections to Herak and its more widely known political offshoot, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), have [persisted](#) for over a decade, and if they weren’t true before 2011-2012, they certainly were afterwards. As is the case everywhere Iran exports its revolution, it retains relations with nearly all parties; in Yemen, it supported the Believing Youth

apartment in [Hizbullah's stronghold] of the southern suburb of Beirut. ... South Yemen Movement members are coming illegally into Lebanon. They enter the country in cars with tinted windows. ***The Houthis train here. [Shiite] Bahrainis train here, and so does the Iranian-backed opposition in Saudi Arabia*** [emphasis added].

Reports in *Asharq Al-Awsat* in 2013 [claimed](#) that hundreds of Ansar Allah fighters had been dispatched to fight in Syria under Hezbollah and Iranian command almost as soon as the revolution began, considering the defense of Bashar al-Assad's regime to be a *Jihad*. Ansar Allah fighters would travel to Hezbollah training camps in Lebanon and thence to Syria, with one Yemeni official asserting: "The arrival of Houthi fighters in Syria coincided with the announcement of Hezbollah's involvement in the fighting alongside the Syrian regime [at Qusayr]."

Certainly by late 2014, hundreds of Ansar Allah fighters were being [flown](#) to Iran for training, while senior Iranian officials quoted by *Reuters* said there were already hundreds of IRGC advisers in Yemen [training](#) Ansar Allah locally, as well. When Sana'a fell to Ansar Allah, U.S. intelligence files were [looted](#) and "handed directly to Iranian advisers". Tens of thousands of Ansar Allah supporters protesting against the government in the last few months of 2014 — at a time when Ansar Allah was already in de facto control of the state, but had not yet launched its official coup d'état — [waved](#) photos of Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, Ayatollah Khomeini, and Hussein and Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, among other lynchpins of Iran's Revolution.



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insurgency even while retaining relations with the official government and the southern separatists throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and has even reportedly succeeded in [peeling off](#) members of Islah, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political party fighting the Houthis alongside the Saudi-led coalition, to join Ansar Allah. The STC [accused](#) Islah of complicity in Houthi missile strikes against them.

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## Iran Victorious: 2015-2020

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### *Houthi Takeover, Hezbollah Model*

Ansar Allah's coup d'état in Yemen was so reminiscent of Hezbollah's takeover of Beirut in 2008 that even Mareike Transfeld, who minimizes Iranian influence over the Houthis, [remarks](#): "The parallels in the Hezbollah takeover of West Beirut in 2008 and the Houthi grab of power in 2014 also suggest some exchange on military strategy."

There was an [unfortunate rumor](#) spread by anonymous Obama administration officials that Ansar Allah disobeyed Iran by officially taking over Sana'a, which is often cited by sceptical analysts as proof that Iran does not control the group. This claim is not remotely credible, particularly given the context: the administration was trying to insulate Iran from criticism due to negotiations over the country's nuclear program.<sup>66</sup> In fact, according to Arash Azizi, the situation was precisely the reverse: it was Khamenei that ordered Abdul-Malik al-Houthi to subvert the transitional government process and take over the country.<sup>67</sup> These rumors should be analyzed in this light and in view of everything that happened leading up to the capture of Sana'a and immediately afterwards.

As soon as Ansar Allah arrested, exiled, or co-opted the official government, they [opened](#) an air bridge with Iran, using a twice-daily service operated by Iran's Mahan Air, [sanctioned](#) and [banned](#) by the U.S. and several European countries "for providing financial, material and technological support to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF)."

By May 2015, three months after Ansar Allah officially seized the capital and began expanding outward, Iran was [reported](#) to have at least 5,000 IRGC operatives in the country, including scores of its Iraqi Shiite militia commanders,<sup>68</sup> and an unknown number of Hezbollah advisers. In 2015 and 2016, Ansar Allah sent a delegation to Iraq to consult with Iran's proxies there, which in turn began recruiting the aforementioned fighters to go to Yemen.<sup>69</sup>

There are a [series of quotes](#) from senior Iranian officials<sup>70</sup> during early 2015 compiled by the *Middle East Media Research Institute* (MEMRI), dismissed by sceptics as mere rhetoric, that demonstrate exactly how Iran viewed this victory.

Then Deputy Qods Force commander (now commander) Esmail Qaani, for instance, proclaimed in 2015:

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<sup>66</sup> The administration even reportedly [turned a blind eye](#) to Hezbollah's global crime syndicate for the same reason and allegedly [refused](#) to act against Bashar al-Assad at least partially because of diplomatic activities involving Iran.

<sup>67</sup> Azizi, p. 218: "The Houthis had been initially happy to go with the Riyadh-engineered transition and find a role in the future parliament of Yemen ... another decision had been made in Tehran, fully supported by the ambitious Abdulmalek. The Houthis would resist and continue their movement."

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). (2020). *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. Taylor & Francis Group, p. 133

<sup>70</sup> As well as media reports between 2014-2015 on the extent of Iranian political, economic, and military support for Ansar Allah

The Islamic Republic of Iran is spreading in these lands from day to day, because the Islamic Revolution is not limited by geographic borders. ... Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Yemen are among the countries conquered by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Khamenei's personal representative in the Qods Force, Ali Shirazi, crowed:

Whether or not our enemies like it, the Islamic Revolution has been advancing since its beginning, and today we have might in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bahrain, Yemen, and even Saudi Arabia, that we did not have from 1978-1991. ... In the not-so-distant future, we will see the twilight of America and Israel — this is not a slogan. ... Today we in Iran, Hizbullah in Lebanon, Ansar Allah in Yemen, the National Defense Force in Syria, [and] the popular forces (*al-Hashd al-Shabi*) in Iraq have become much stronger. ... The great popular army begins to take shape in the world; be certain that this movement is undefeatable.

According to MEMRI:

Qods Force Deputy Commander Qaani acknowledged that the Qods Force was operating in Yemen when he said that it had evacuated 52 people wounded in the March 20, 2015 mosque bombings in Sana'a to Tehran for medical treatment. One of the wounded, Muhammad Abdel-Malik al-Shami, who was in charge of liaison between the Houthis and Iran, later died; he was buried by Hizbullah in Dahiya, Beirut, next to Hizbullah commander Imad Mughniya.

Qassem Soleimani himself said, "Today we are seeing the signs of the export of the Islamic Revolution across the region, from Bahrain and Iraq to Syria, Yemen, and North Africa," while Assembly of Experts member and Tehran Friday preacher Ahmad Khatami said, "Ansar Allah in Yemen, Hizbullah in Lebanon, and Syria, Iraq, and Iran are a single front standing against America."

Most strikingly, Shirazi declared in January 2015, "Ansar Allah are a copy of Lebanese Hizbullah. The popular Basij in Iraq and Syria are also copies of Hizbullah and Ansar Allah." "Hezbollah was formed in Lebanon as a popular force like al-Basij," he [continued](#). "Similarly, popular forces were also formed in Syria and Iraq, and today we are watching the formation of Ansar Allah in Yemen."

### ***Houthis Adopt Iran's Governing Structures***

Iran, ecstatic at the opportunity to finally establish a revolutionary theocracy abroad, moved quickly to transplant its governing organs to Yemen almost wholesale, with Ansar Allah seizing control of the state ever-more tightly in a way almost exactly parallels how the Islamic Republic consolidated in Iran after the Revolution.

Ansar Allah, which has [declared](#) itself a 'movement' rather than an organization, established a parallel shadow state after its coup in 2014, consisting of "popular" and "revolutionary" committees, as well as political commissars (*mushrifin*) and



“Houthified” local allies outside the core of the group (*mutahawwithin*) that [oversee](#) the formal government structures that Ansar Allah has co-opted from governors down to the neighborhood level and in every sphere, from education to security.<sup>71</sup> This is analogous to the *komitehs* and other instruments the Islamist revolutionaries created in Iran to draw practical power away from the formal state in Iran during the transition phase in 1979.

Continuing the analogy, the formal and shadow governments in Yemen have begun to merge since 2017 in several areas, with Houthis taking the reins directly as well as fulfilling supervisory roles over government departments. These political commissars and allies report directly to Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, who is referred to as “Leader of the Quranic March” — the term Ansar Allah uses to [describe](#) its expansionist wars of conquest, again indicating their concerns and grievances are not local. Abdul-Malik has no formal position in the government, despite being the sole executive authority, exactly as Khomeini controlled Iran from behind the scenes for nearly a year after the Revolution until he was named Supreme Leader. Just as in Iran during the transition phase, the formal state structures in Houthi-held Yemen are a mere facade for radical clerical forces — dedicated to the ever-expanding, supranational Revolution — that truly control every aspect of government and society.<sup>72</sup>

Even Mohammad Almahfali and James Root, who are among those that downplay Iranian influence over the Houthis, could not help but be [struck by the parallel](#):

Since ousting the internationally recognized Yemeni government, the Houthis have begun to construct a regime that corresponds to their aspiration to emulate the Iranian revolutionary system. ... The system is nevertheless comparable to, although not an exact mirror of, the Iranian political system. Like in the Iranian system, the “leader of the revolution” (analogous to the supreme leader) is the pre-eminent authority and holds decisive sway over political decisions. With its control and oversight of the various departments of government, the Supreme Political Council can be compared to the Iranian Expediency Council. The Supreme Revolutionary Committee appears comparable to the Guardian Council, in that it seeks to ensure the continuation of the revolution as evidenced by the dismissal of parliament and its initial establishment of a temporary government. The military wing of the Houthi movement is analogous to the Revolutionary Guards, responsible for security and defending the revolution in the ongoing civil war.

From 2015, Iran and its proxies created a deadly ballistic and cruise missile force, as well as an array of offensive drones for Ansar Allah and [expanded](#) their capabilities to attack

<sup>71</sup> ACAPS (2020). *The Houthi Supervisory System: The Interplay of Formal State Institutions and Informal Political Structures*.

<sup>72</sup> See ACAPS (2020). *The Houthi Supervisory System: The Interplay of Formal State Institutions and Informal Political Structures*, pp. 4-5: “The main function of the supervisory system is to provide a direct connection between Houthi national leadership and the local governance system, to guarantee that central directives are locally executed. The system parallels the structure of state institutions on each formal level and supervisors establish a symbiotic relation with ministers, governors (muhafiz), district directors, neighbourhood chairmen (‘aqil al-hara), school directors, police department officers, military brigade commanders, detention facility directors, security checkpoint commanders and so forth, effectively replacing these officers in their decisional and executive capacity. Though supervisors are often referred to as ‘Ansar Allah supervisors’, they are not formally elected or transparently appointed by Ansar Allah’s political department. Rather, there is evidence that they are appointed by the Supreme Revolutionary Committee and directly report to Abdulmalik al-Houthi.”

Saudi Arabia and harass shipping and naval forces off Yemen's coast. As Fabian Hinz, an expert on the missile programs of Iran and its proxies, has [noted](#), Hezbollah and the IRGC are helping Ansar Allah establish subterranean facilities as well as [local production](#) for missiles using Iranian parts and equipment, just as Hezbollah has done in Lebanon.

### ***Houthis Openly Join the “Resistance Axis”***

However, full Ansar Allah integration into Iran's “Resistance Axis” of proxies and allies across the region only occurred after Saleh, until December 2017 an ally, was [killed](#) by the Houthis after announcing that he was switching sides. On the subject of Iranian command and control, Azizi writes “he was killed by a Houthi sniper, on the direct orders from Qassem Soleimani”.<sup>73</sup> Saleh's lawyer [confirms](#) the IRGC was behind Saleh's assassination.

It was only then that all masks fell away. In 2018, Houthi leader Abdul-Malik began to [fiercely attack](#) adherents of the Baha'i faith in Yemen in identical language used by Khomeini and his successors, who have made the elimination of the Baha'i one of their priorities, on religious grounds not dissimilar to those that led ISIS to purge the Yazidis from areas they captured. 2018 also saw the first [reports](#) of Liwa Fatemiyoun, the IRGC's Afghan militia, appearing in Yemen, as well as the first official, highly publicized meeting between Ansar Allah and its parent organization, Hezbollah, in Beirut. Of course, this was far from the first interaction between the two IRGC clones, which had been in contact since the 1980s. The [report](#) on the meeting in *The Arab Weekly* notes:

Houthi delegates have in recent years travelled frequently to Beirut, where they receive money sent by Tehran. Two senior Houthis — Jibreel al-Houthi, the son of Houthi leader Abdelmalik al-Houthi, and Mohammad Ali al-Houthi, the head of the Revolutionary Council of Ansar al-Allah — reportedly live in southern Beirut, using fake passports.

Finally, in August 2019, the Houthis and Iran [publicized](#) the first official meeting between a Houthi delegation and Khamenei in Tehran, including a letter from Abdul-Malik to the Supreme Leader. Not coincidentally, it was immediately after this meeting that Ansar Allah began directly threatening Israel, although Abdul-Malik had already [declared](#) in 2017, addressing Nasrallah personally, “Your bet on the Yemenis is proper. Israel must beware the Yemeni participation in any of its military confrontations with Hezbollah or the Palestinian resistance.”

Ansar Allah began fundraising for Hezbollah in 2019, [raising](#) about \$300,000. As [reported](#) by Caleb Weiss in *The Long War Journal*:

Sam FM, a Houthi-ran radio station based in Sana'a, announced on Friday that it has begun a pledge campaign to donate funds to Lebanese Hezbollah. The radio station said on its Telegram channel that this drive is “to support the mujahideen masters in this world, the purest of people, Hezbollah.” Sam FM's Telegram channel also republished an interview its director, Hamoud

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<sup>73</sup> Azizi, p. 219.

Mohammad Sharaf, gave to the Houthi-ran Saba News Agency. Sharaf said that the drive is meant to “strengthen the axis of resistance” and that it “represents a surprising and painful blow to the Zionist entity, the enemy of the Arab and Islamic nation.”

In mid-2017, Israel’s then chief of military intelligence Maj. Gen. Herzl Halevi [announced](#) that “Iran has been working for the past year to set up indigenous infrastructures for producing precise munitions both in Lebanon and Yemen. We can’t ignore that, and we won’t.” In September 2019, Ansar Allah [released](#) a propaganda video with Hebrew subtitles threatening cruise missile attacks on Israel; in October, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [accused](#) Iran of trying to strike Israel from Yemen; and in December, Ansar Allah’s Defense Minister [accused](#) Israel of having been involved in the Saudi-led intervention since the very beginning,<sup>74</sup> and said they [possessed](#) a bank of Israeli land and sea targets to strike in retaliation.

Ansar Allah demonstrated just how intertwined it was with Iran’s axis after the devastating drone and missile attacks on Saudi ARAMCO oil installations in September 2019, loyally [claiming](#) the attacks to muddy the waters on retaliation despite them having been launched by one of IRGC’s Iraqi proxies or directly from Iran itself. Iran then [echoed](#) the Houthi claim.<sup>75</sup> Iran continues to coordinate strikes from Yemen and Iraq against Saudi Arabia via its various IRGC proxies, between which there is no longer any relevant distinction beyond ethnicity — all are children of the Islamic Revolution and act at Tehran’s behest.

A [summary](#) of one of a June 2019 Abdul-Malik al-Houthi speech reads:

Sayed Houthi slammed some Arab media for tarnishing the image of the Palestinian resistance and Hezbollah, stressing that Ansarullah is not embarrassed over the relation with Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon whom he called them “are firm on their stance towards Palestine.” He hailed Hezbollah by saying that the Lebanese resistance movement “is a source of pride for our nation.” The leader of the Iran-backed Houthi militias in Yemen, Abdul Malik Badreddine al-Houthi, on Friday 28 June 2019, gave a hate-spurring speech at a rally to mark their adoption of the “Khomeini Cry”. Al-Houthi reiterated that the Iran-tailored Khomeini culture will remain a “cornerstone in the Houthi group’s fight against the world.” The militia leader also claimed a monopoly over the Palestinian cause, saying that any approach to the decades-long struggle outside the Tehran agenda is invalid and goes against “Islam and Muslims.”

Shortly after this, in August 2019, Abdul-Malik allegedly [pledged his allegiance](#) to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

<sup>74</sup> An August 2019 [report](#) in *Al-Jarida* claimed Israel was considering strikes against Ansar Allah and Hezbollah missiles sites in Yemen and that Israel was passing intelligence on weapons transfers to the Gulf states.

<sup>75</sup> This [pattern](#) has continued as of March 2021

Following the assassination of Qassem Soleimani and his Iraqi viceroy Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020,<sup>76</sup> IRGC aerospace commander Brig. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh gave a press conference with Ansar Allah's resistance flag<sup>77</sup> [displayed](#) prominently behind him alongside those of Iran's other regional proxies.

*The Arab Weekly* [reports](#) on the mourning ceremonies in Yemen:

In Yemen, Iran's embassy in the [Houthi] rebel-controlled capital Sana'a held a ceremony commemorating the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis. Iranian Ambassador Hassan Eyrlo hailed the ties between Tehran and the Houthi rebels.

"This ceremony today shows the deep ties between the two governments and people of Yemen and Iran," he said.

Posters of Soleimani and Muhandis were seen in Sana'a's streets, and Houthi-run radio stations and media outlets dedicated coverage to discussions of the Iranian general and the Iraqi militia leader.

Hassan Eyrlo's appointment as Iran's new ambassador to Yemen is the denouement of Iran's decades-long cultivation of the Houthi family. According to former Houthi official Ali al-Bukhaiti, Eyrlo is Khamenei's [personal satrap](#) in Yemen and a senior IRGC official with no relation to the Foreign Ministry. Moreover, he has been Khamenei's point man on Yemen for years, personally responsible for doling out cash to Houthi leaders. Al-Bukhaiti recalls [meeting](#) Eyrlo<sup>78</sup> several times in Beirut, including one trip in 2014 where Eyrlo invited him to Iran and gave him a tour:

He arranged for a tour of the Khomeini mausoleum, Khomeini's house and other places. He also took me to Khamenei's house where I performed group Friday prayers led by Khamenei himself. ... The appointment of Eyrlo as an ambassador to Sanaa's government run by Houthis has dangerous implications given his relationships with most of the Houthi leaders. ... He used to host them and give them amounts of money in Beirut and Iran. ... He has an influence over them. ... His appointment is a smart Iranian move, allowing Tehran to have a strong controlling hand inside Yemen. It's a hand that gave senior Houthi leaders hundreds of thousands of dollars when they could not find thousands of Yemeni riyals which had little value. It's a hand that took them to hotels in Tehran and Beirut and onboard Qatar Airways, when all they knew were the mountains, cliffs, and donkeys of Saada. ... Eyrlo's appointment as ambassador is just cover for the real role he will play in Yemen. He is, in fact, the vali-ye faqih, the Imam Ali Khamenei in Yemen, and you can picture what a pivotal role he is entrusted with.

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<sup>76</sup> A simultaneous operation was [launched](#) to assassinate Abdul Reza Shahlai, the senior IRGC Qods Force commander on the ground in Yemen and one of the organization's most important operatives. He had previously been among the foremost officials running the IRGC-supervised insurgency against U.S. forces in Iraq from 2004 and creating Iran's Iraqi versions of Hezbollah. His presence in Yemen is one of many indications of how important this front is to Iran.

<sup>77</sup> This is not the official Ansar Allah banner. Mohammad Almahfali and James Root [explain](#): "An early emblem widely associated with the Houthis and used outside of Yemen by Iranian and Lebanese media, apparently without the group's objection, shared common elements and features with those of Hezbollah and the seal of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Iran-backed Iraqi paramilitary groups such as Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba and Kataeb Hezbollah also employ similar images in their logos."

<sup>78</sup> Nom de guerre: Abu Hassan.

The most recent [report](#) about Eyrlo cites Yemeni political sources complaining:

Eyrlo, an officer in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), whose arrival in Yemen and his accreditation by the Houthis as ambassador of the Iranian regime to the local authorities remain shrouded in mystery, is behaving as an Iranian military ruler in Sana'a.

In February of this year, Eyrlo [proclaimed](#) that the conquest of Yemen by Ansar Allah was an extension of Khomeini's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

And with that, for the first time since 1979, Iran established a nearly perfect replica of itself, with absolute power, completely subordinated to the Supreme Leader, something it hadn't managed to do in forty years in Iraq, Afghanistan, or even Lebanon.



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## What the Future Holds

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What's in a name? The guardians of Iran's revolution are not called the *Iranian* Revolutionary Guard Corps — they are the *Islamic* Revolutionary Guard Corps. A seminal analysis of the IRGC's own ideological training manuals by Kasra Aarabi, vital to understanding the Iranian regime's activities and its relationship to its proxies, shows that the IRGC refers to its members as "Mujahideen" — warriors of God — and that the standalone concept of "Iran" is not mentioned at all in its materials.<sup>79</sup>

The IRGC and the Revolution it was created to guard are fundamentally, existentially opposed to the entire concept of nation-states and borders, viewing Iran as merely a springboard for the perpetual expansion of a supranational revolution. The IRGC's primary driver is an Islamic Manifest Destiny revolving around the divine mandate of *al-Wali al-Faqih*, Iran's Supreme Leader, to lead the entire Islamic world.<sup>80</sup> Remaining and Expanding (*Baqiya Wa Tatamadad*) — the slogan of the Islamic State — is no less applicable to the IRGC, which is conducting a proactive, constant *jihad* no less vicious and no less expansionist. Iran is not a defensive power, and it is not responding to Saudi, American, or Israeli activities. Khomeini's Green Socialism, incorporating Soviet anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist rhetoric wholesale into his unique Islamic framework, can never stop cloning and expanding itself by its very nature, any more than the Communist superpower could. Only once this is understood can one analyse the evolution of Ansar Allah and its place in Iran's worldview.

The first country Ansar Allah [sought out](#) following its conquest of Sana'a was Russia. This was without doubt done at the behest of Qassem Soleimani, [tasked](#) by Khamenei since early 2015 to organize the joint Russo-Iranian intervention in Syria to rescue Assad. While there's no evidence that this [outreach](#) has borne fruit, it is certainly true that Russia is becoming more and more [involved](#), at the very least on the [diplomatic end](#), in the conflict, the goal being to help Iran consolidate its power and thereby undermine the United States and its influence and alliances in the region.

From [Venezuela](#) to [Afghanistan](#), Russia and Iran have worked hand in glove towards these goals. Given the Biden administration's [myopic commitment](#) to "ending the war" in Yemen by pressuring only Saudi Arabia, while ruling out any use of force, Iran will have free rein, barring any black swans, to pursue war until total victory in Yemen, with Russia providing diplomatic cover all the way.

But this war has nothing to do with Yemen, despite long-standing fears and suspicions that what Badr al-Din al-Houthi and his sons always desired was to reestablish the 1,000-year Zaydi Imamate that ruled Yemen until 1962. As a fully subsumed component of the IRGC, Ansar Allah does not care about Yemen; on the contrary, borders and nation-states are anathema. One senior Houthi official, dismissing the borders between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, [told](#) the *BBC* in 2015:

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<sup>79</sup> Aarabi, K. (2020). *Beyond Borders: The Expansionist Ideology of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps*. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, p. 32

<sup>80</sup> Another rarely discussed yet vital part of Iranian ideology is based on the concept of *Umm al-Qura*. As explained by Aarabi (p. 27): According to the theory of Umm al-Qura, "after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Iran became the leader of the Islamic ummah (or world)" and "all Muslims have a responsibility to regard the guardianship and leadership of Imam Khomeini as the only leader of the Islamic ummah."

The Houthis are part of the Muslim world. We can't be defined by a sect or confined by borders. Our borders are the Holy Quran and the Islamic and Arab World. We will help oppressed people all over the world.<sup>81</sup> ... If the relationship between the Yemeni and Saudi Arabian people is strengthened, then it will ease the fall of the house of al Saud. Yes, it will be a painful surgical procedure, but in the end there will be healing from the sickness.

The Houthis are not a local Yemeni movement; they never were. They have been a core part of Khomeini's revolution for nearly four decades, and, like their progenitors, even if they manage to fully conquer and consolidate power in Yemen, they will not stop their relentless expansion unless they are stopped by overwhelming force.



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<sup>81</sup> This is Khomeinism verbatim—and has no relation to anything Zaydi. As Khomeini's grandson told an interviewer in 1979: "There is a revolution and there is a government. The government thinks and functions within the framework of Iran, but the Islamic Revolution goes beyond this framework to all the Islamic nations and also to all the nations of the world. Therefore, we make a distinction between the revolution and the government because the positions that Imam Khomeyni takes call for assistance to the oppressed of the earth." See JPRS 74767 (December 13, 1979), p.8.