

The Houthi Jihad Council: Command and Control in ‘the Other Hezbollah’

By Michael Knights, Adnan al-Gabarni, and Casey Coombs

A fragile U.N.-brokered ceasefire between the Houthis and their military opponents in Yemen’s Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) held from April to October 2022 but has now lapsed. The Houthis hold the key to an enduring ceasefire in Yemen, and can threaten the stability of Red Sea shipping lanes and the security of the United States and its partners in the Middle East. All these considerations necessitate a fuller understanding of the Houthi political-military leadership, its core motivations, and the nature and extent of Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah influence within the movement. This study argues that the Houthi movement is now more centralized and cohesive than ever, in part due to close mentoring from Lebanese Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The Houthi Jihad Council is emerging as a remarkable partner for Iran and the Houthi-Iran relationship and should no longer be viewed as a relationship of necessity, but rather a strong, deep-rooted alliance that is underpinned by tight ideological affinity and geopolitical alignment. The emergence of a ‘southern Hezbollah’ is arguably now a fact on the ground.

In September 2018, one of the authors of this article published an analysis of the military evolution of the Houthi movement^a in *CTC Sentinel*, noting the group’s very rapid five-year development from an insurgent group fielding roadside bombs to a state-level actor using medium-range ballistic missiles.¹ Since then, the Houthis have further consolidated their hold over the Yemeni capital, Sana’a, and the Red Sea coast port city of Hodeida, and nearly won the civil war with a sustained (but ultimately indecisive) military offensive against Yemen’s oil and gas hub at Ma’rib.² On January 19, 2021, the outgoing Trump administration designated the Houthi organizational institution Ansar Allah as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO), a step that the Biden administration almost immediately revoked on February 16,

2021.³ Some Houthi leaders remained covered by older sanctions^{4b} (and additional Houthi military leaders continue to be added to U.S. sanctions lists) for posing a “threat to the peace, security, or stability of Yemen.”⁵

A fragile U.N.-brokered ceasefire between the Houthis and their military opponents in Yemen’s Presidential Leadership Council (PLC)⁶ held from April to October 2022 but has (at the time of writing) lapsed,^{7c} and the path to long-term conflict resolution remains unclear. As a rebel force now in control of much of the Yemeni state, the Houthis will likely be required to give up some of their gains in return for an enduring peace, and such a peace may not be welcomed by the Houthis’ strongest backers in the war—namely Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah.^d The Houthis continue to pose a military and counterterrorism threat to the United States

- b The U.S. government noted: “Ansarallah leaders Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim remain sanctioned under E.O. 13611 related to acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen.” “Revocation of the Terrorist Designations of Ansarallah,” U.S. Department of State, February 12, 2021.
- c The truce was up for renewal on October 2 but had not (at the time of publication) been renewed immediately and thus lapsed, perhaps temporarily.
- d The Saudi and Gulf military commitment in Yemen gives a competitive advantage to Iran, forcing Gulf missile defenses and other resources to be deployed away from the Gulf littoral shared with Iran and toward a new western and southern front. The Yemen war is a geopolitical lever on the Saudis that Iran, through its support to the Houthis, may be in a position to manipulate. See Gerald M. Feierstein, “Iran’s Role in Yemen and Prospects for Peace,” Middle East Institute, December 6, 2018, and Thomas Juneau, “How Iran Helped Houthis Expand Their Reach,” War on the Rocks, August 23, 2021.

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a Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells noted that the Houthis are known by a variety of names: “the ‘Huthis’ (al-Huthiyin), the ‘Huthi movement’ (al-Haraka al-Huthiya), ‘Huthist elements’ (al-‘anasir al-Huthiya), ‘Huthi supporters’ (Ansar al-Huthi), or ‘Believing Youth Elements’ (‘Anasir al-Shabab al-Mu’min).” Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2010), p. 189.

and its partners in the region,^e as well as a menace to global commerce in the Red Sea.^f All these considerations necessitate a fuller understanding of the Houthi political-military leadership, its core motivations, and the nature and extent of Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah influence within the movement.

In this new article, an enlarged and strengthened team with extensive on-the-ground access in Houthi-held areas^g will look in-depth at the structure and composition of Houthi military leadership. An excellent anthropological and socio-political literature already exists on the Houthis thanks to ground-breaking studies by RAND^h and the writings of academics such as Marieke Brandt.⁹ This article builds on this literature by updating the RAND study and focusing more attention on military aspects and on the proven roles of Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah in Houthi military affairs. In the opening section, the article reviews the genealogical, social, political-religious, and environmental (i.e., wartime) drivers for the emergence of the current generation of Houthi military and security leaders. It next examines command politics under the Houthis' current leader Abdalmalik al-Huthi. It then looks in-depth at the Jihad Council established by the Houthis to centralize military and security decision-making using a mechanism adapted from Lebanese Hezbollah. Then the article looks at the role within the Houthi Jihad Council of the IRGC Jihad Assistant and his Lebanese Hezbollah Deputy. The next section explores the Houthi administrative takeover of Yemen's military institutions and the gradual mobilization and indoctrination of a new generation of active service soldiers and reserves. In the penultimate part, the article looks at how the Houthis employ armed forces and which commanders have operational control of key geographic commands and praetorian or specialized forces. The article concludes with analytic findings concerning which segments of the Houthi war machine might support conflict termination and which elements are most likely to continue to threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen.

Generational Change in the Houthi Leadership

The composition of the Houthi movement has changed throughout its lifespan, demonstrating (in the view of the authors) both a remarkable openness to an ever-broadening general membership but also, under the surface, an obdurate refusal to share real power beyond a small set of male antecedents related to religious scholar Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a *sadah*¹⁰ (descendant of the Prophet) and

e As earlier footnotes detail, the Houthis have been designated as a threat to the peace and stability of Yemen. They have also fired anti-shiping missiles at U.S. naval vessels, kidnapped American citizens, fired missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and threatened Israel. For a review of the case for designating the Houthis as terrorists, see Lucy van der Kroft, "Yemen's Houthis and the Terrorist Designation System," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), June 2021, pp. 11-16.

f For instance, then president of the Houthi Supreme Political Council Saleh al-Samad, said the Houthis would "cut international navigation," and the Houthi television channel Al-Masirah added that al-Samad threatened to "block the Red Sea and target international navigation." See Ali Mahmood, "Houthis threaten to block shipping traffic in Red Sea," *National*, January 9, 2018.

g Al Masdar Online and the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies both operate extensive contact networks and research capabilities focused on (and present in) Houthi-held northern Yemen.

influential Zaydi^h preacher until his death (by natural causes) in 2010.¹¹ Of critical importance, Badr al-Din and his sons were members of the minority Jarudi sect of Zaydism,ⁱ the denomination of Zaydism closest to Shi'a Islam in political theology.^j

Badr al-Din was thus the root of today's Houthi movement, which is still dominated by his sons and other male relatives.¹² The four marriages of Badr al-Din¹³ created the foundation of the Houthi movement in the Sa`ada province of northern Yemen. Badr al-Din had 13 sons who reached maturity.¹⁴ Of these 13, most married at least once. This created a baseline force consisting of circles of tribal protection for Badr al-Din and his sons. As noted by Marieke Brandt, the preeminent anthropologist of the Houthi area, the Khawlan tribal confederation of northern Yemen was "the first incubator of the Houthi movement."¹⁵

Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi built upon this base to form the first generation of the Houthi paramilitary movement in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁶ He had his father's gift for oratory and religious studies, and he was highly political.^k Born in either 1956 or 1959, Husayn

h The Zaydi branch as a whole cannot be clearly defined as Sunni or Shi'a. Qom-trained theologian Mehdi Khalaji reflects a mainstream view that Zaydi jurisprudence is most similar to the Hanafi and Shafei (Sunni) schools of Islamic law. Like Sunni branches of Islam, most Zaydis do not reject Abu Bakr, Omar, and Uthman as the Prophet Mohammad's rightful successors. Yemeni Zaydism differs from prevalent "Twelver" Shi'a Muslims dominant in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon because Twelvers see the proper line of descent from Prophet Mohammad running via one descendent (the fifth imam, Mohammed al-Baqir) to a messianic 12th imam, while the "Fiver" Zaydis believe in a different line of descent and method of succession branching from their preferred fifth imam, Zayd. See Mehdi Khalaji, "Yemen's Zaydis: A Window for Iranian Influence," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2015. See also "Appendix B: Zaydism" in Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 290-294. See also "From Insurgents to Hybrid Sector Actors? Deconstructing Yemen's Huthi Movement," Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, April 2017.

i Badr al-Din's family are adherents to the Jarudi sect of the Zaydi branch of Islam (with the other contemporaneous sects being Sulaymaniya, Jaririya, Butriya, and Salihiya). Houthi news sources tend to downplay this fact, but even their own leaders occasionally reference it. Mohammed Azzan, a co-founder of Believing Youth and a leading mainstream Zaydi revivalist, identifies the Houthi movement as "a political movement with a religious background belonging to the Zaydi sect, especially the Jarudi current." See Mohammed Azzan, "The Houthis directed the path of 'believing youth' to an extremist project," *Alameenpress.net*, accessed on October 11, 2022. For broader studies on the Jarudi aspect of the Houthi movement, see Nasser Abdullah Al-Qafari, "Zaydi Innocence from the Houthis," *Al Bayan Magazine* 337 (2015) and also the following two Arabic books: Ahmed Mohammed al-Daghshi, "The Houthis: A Comprehensive Methodological Study," Arab House of Sciences, December 2009 and Suleiman al-Saleh al-Ghosn and Suleiman Bin Saleh Bin Abdulaziz, "The Truth About the Houthis," King Fahd National Library, 2010.

j The Jarudi are the closest of any Zaydi sect to mainstream "Twelver" Shiism practiced in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Unlike other Zaydis, and in keeping with mainstream Shiism, the Jarudis reject Abu Bakr, Omar, and Uthman as usurpers of Ali's right to be Prophet Mohammad's rightful successor. On Jarudi beliefs, see the excellent tables and discussion in "Appendix B: Zaydism" in Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 290-294. See also Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "The Houthis' endgame in Yemen," *Al Jazeera Opinion*, December 21, 2017, and Noman Ahmed and Mahmoud Shamsan, "Analysis: Origins of the Houthi supremacist ideology," *Commonspace*, August 23, 2022.

k Husayn embraced all forms of political Islamic activity. He was briefly a member of Yemen's parliament for a year. He broke with mainstream Zaydism by proselytizing and propagating his political beliefs in a manner that was unusual for Zaydis. Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 290. See also Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 150.

was a young and politically receptive twenty-something when the Islamic Revolution unfolded in Iran. Far from reluctant or recent partners of Iran, Badr al-Din and Husayn's family enthusiastically embraced Khomeinism and the example of the Islamic Revolution.^l As Morteza Mohatwari, a senior Zaydi cleric, said in 2010, for Zaydis of Husayn's generation the Iranian regime's version of Twelver Shiism is the true Zaydism because it mobilizes the masses to confront foreign powers and unjust rulers.^m His father Badr al-Din visited Iran (and Beirut) for intermittent stays between 1979 and Badr al-Din's death in 2010,¹⁷ usually taking Husayn and later some of his other sons with him, notably his fifth son, Mohammed (born around 1965),¹⁸ and his ninth son, Abdalmalik (born around 1979),ⁿ both of whom were avid religious students produced by Badr al-Din's unions with *sadah* families.^o

By the early 1990s, Husayn had two main political influences: Iran's first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Usama bin Ladin, both of whose speeches he followed with particular fascination due to their willingness to stand up to Israel and to American "arrogance."^p In 1994, Badr al-Din and Husayn began sending 40 religious students a year to Qom^q—a flow that would eventually produce around 800 Qom-trained students,^r some of whom are reported to have been groomed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with paramilitary training.¹⁹ In

l Qom-trained theologian Mahdi Khalaji noted that "Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, led by a Twelver Shiite jurist, was a theological surprise for Zaidis in Yemen because they had believed that such uprisings were what differentiated them from Twelvers. Subsequently, the Twelver branch became so appealing to Yemeni Shiites that many of them traveled to Iran to learn more about it." See Khalaji.

m Khalaji quotes Hassan Zaid, the leader of the Houthi political party Al-Haq, as telling him: "We believe that Khomeini was a true Zaidi. Theologically our differences with Hezbollah and the Iranian government are minor, but politically we are identical." Khalaji.

n Abdalmalik's birthdate is variously given as between 1979 and 1982, depending on the source. The authors assess, based on the preponderance of anecdotal reporting, that Abdalmalik's birthdate is closer to 1979. Drawn from details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also "Yemen designations," U.S. Department of Treasury, April 14, 2015.

o For years after the war, Husayn berated Yemen's government for fighting the Islamic Republic of Iran. See this audio recording: Husayn Badr al-Din, "A rare clip of the founder of the Houthi movement, Hussein al-Houthi, in which he threatens to punish the Yemeni army for its participation against Iran," YouTube, May 8, 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZZt810mvFE>

p Husayn used to repeat the phrase that "the nation will not defeat America and Israel without the leadership of Ahl al-Bayt," meaning the *sadah*, seeing himself as a Hashemite version of Usama bin Ladin. For instance: "On the day [Osama] appeared, and we saw many people thinking that he would be the savior of the nation, we would say: 'No, that will never be achieved through his hands ... The nation's salvation from the mid guidance it is experiencing will only be at the hands of the family of the Messenger of God.'" See Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi, "Lessons from the guidance of the holy Quran: The responsibility of Ahl al-Bayt, peace be upon them," Huda.live.com, December 21, 2002.

q Forty students per year were paid for by the Iranian authorities, a flow that continued from 1994 to the blockade of Yemen after the Houthi coup in September 2014. Drawn from an interview for this study. Names of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

r Forty students per year in the 20 years between 1994 and 2014 equals 800 individual students.

1999-2000, Husayn Badr al-Din spent a year undertaking religious studies in Khartoum²⁰ at a time when Sudan was the most active IRGC and Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) outstation on the Red Sea.²¹ Husayn then went from Sudan to Iran, and when he returned from this retreat, he introduced the now infamous slogan that supercharged the Houthi movement, "the scream" (*al-shi'ar*): "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam."²²

Scholars disagree on the fundamental drivers of Husayn's political ambitions: One theory is that Badr al-Din and Husayn were primarily pursuing a so-called *hadawi*²³ agenda, a doctrine that held *sadah* (collectively the Ahl al-Bayt, the descendants of the Prophet) to be superior to other Yemenis and the only caste fit for leadership.²⁴ In the *hadawi* theory, Badr al-Din and Husayn sought a return of some form of imamate or other system of governance under *sadah* leadership (which had been the long preeminent form of government in parts of northern Yemen from around 897 AD until 1962 AD).²⁵ Others see a combination of social mobility and dynastic agendas,²⁶ with Badr al-Din and Husayn outmaneuvering longer-established and richer Zaydi *sadah* families through the dynamic use of a Lebanese Hezbollah-type Zaydi-Shi'a revivalist movement (called "Believing/Faithful Youth" (*Muntada al-Shahabal-Mu'min*)) that employed summer camps, social programs, and a political party.²⁷ Still others assess that Badr al-Din and Husayn were surreptitiously introducing Jarudi Zaydism and related Iranian Twelver aspects to the broader Zaydi practice of Islam^{28s}—what Oved Lobel characterized as "a neo-Twelver core carved out of the Zaydi revival."²⁹ All, some, or none of these motives for Badr al-Din and Husayn's activism may have been operative at the same time, but what the authors of this study assess can be said with a higher degree of certainty is that Husayn and his father were intent on breaking the mold of northern Yemeni political Islam and that they looked to the Islamic Revolution in Iran and to Lebanese Hezbollah for inspiration, ideas, and support.^t

All of the above factors shaped the composition of the Houthi leadership that emerged under Husayn and entered the first of the six wars that raged between the Yemeni government and the Houthi movement in 2004-2010.³⁰ Husayn now commanded a sizable

s Brandt notes: "To many Zaydis, the new dynamic, self-assertive Zaydi activism, which had emerged from the confrontation with Sunni extremism, was quite unfamiliar; some suspected that the Houthi movement was in fact not a revival of Yemeni Zaydism, but rather an externally operated movement influenced by Iranian Twelver Shiism." Brandt, p. 146. Jarudism and Twelver rituals were hidden in the 1980s as the Yemeni government persecuted Jarudis and Twelvers for their connection to Iran, which Yemen fought in the Iran-Iraq War as an ally to Iraq. See Khalaji. Today in Houthi-controlled areas, Twelver religious practices such as the public commemoration of Ashura are becoming widespread in a way that is foreign to mainstream Yemeni Zaydism. See Cameron Glenn, Garrett Nada, and Mattisan Rowan, "Who are Yemen's Houthis?" Wilson Center, July 7, 2022.

t The 2010 RAND study took a muted view of Iran's influence on the Houthis. See Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 120-123, 170-171. Over time, more evidence has emerged showing the longevity of Iran's covert operations in Yemen, including through leaked documents. For instance, see the interesting document archive stretching back to the 1980s at "Houthi in special documents(2): Comprehensive intelligence report on Iranian efforts to find a foothold in Yemen since the 1980s," Al Masdar Online, April 16, 2020. See also the detailed revisionist text: Oved Lobel, "Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen," Report No. 20, European Eye on Radicalization, March 2021.

cohort of Khawlan bir Amir confederation tribesmen, including hundreds of religious students sent to Qom seminaries and well over 10,000 young men sent through Believing Youth summer camps and social or educational programs under his stewardship inside Yemen.³¹ This initial Houthi cadre demonstrated some of the enduring characteristics of Houthi command and control.

First, in the authors' assessment, the movement preferred the membership of fighters who were with Husayn since the start of the six wars in 2004. In the authors' view, this cadre had advantages over all later joiners due to the longevity of their loyalty and their war service.³² Examples of these elevated early joiners include key *sadah* military commanders Yusuf al-Madani (who married a daughter of Husayn)^v and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim (Abu Ali),^w who Houthi movement historiographer Marieke Brandt characterized as Abdalmalik's military second-in-command in the years leading up to the Houthi takeover of the government in 2014. Non-*sadah* leaders of this status were rare, the exception being Husayn's closest friend and ally prior to Husayn's death in 2004, Abdullah Eida al-Razzami, a *qabili* politician of similar age who served as his right-hand man in the first Houthi-government war in 2004.³³

In the authors' assessment, the struggle to replace Husayn as the Houthi leader in 2005 spotlighted the second key characteristic of Houthi command and control arrangements—that is, Badr al-Din's strong preference for *sadah* leadership drawn only from the

“The selection of Abdalmalik, then a young man in his early twenties, as the supreme military commander of the wartime Houthi movement shines light on a third trend in Houthi command and control—that is, the dominance of leaders with a special connection to Iran and Hezbollah.”

ranks of his relatives.^x As noted, northern Yemen has a deep-seated caste system, topped by the *sadah*, following by other castes—the tribal sheikhs and administrators (*qadi*), and the “third type” (*ahl al-thuluth*), such as artisans, shopkeepers, restaurateurs, and merchants.³⁴ When Husayn was killed by the Yemeni government in 2004, Badr al-Din moved swiftly to personally hold the leadership of the Houthi movement³⁵ in order to prevent leadership from passing outside his family, even to a longstanding *qabili* loyalist such as Abdullah Eida al-Razzami or a *sadah* in-law such as Yusuf al-Madani.³⁶

The selection of Abdalmalik, then a young man in his early twenties, as the supreme military commander of the wartime Houthi movement shines light on a third trend in Houthi command and control—that is, the dominance of leaders with a special connection to Iran and Hezbollah. Setting aside the imprisoned Mohammed³⁷ and the exiled Yahya,³⁷ Badr al-Din bypassed five eligible sons older than Abdalmalik when Husayn died: Abdalqader, Ahmad, Hamid, Amir al-Din, and Ibrahim.³⁸ Indeed, in the authors' reading of events, Badr al-Din did not hesitate to risk alienating the most senior tribes loyal to the Houthis and his elder sons at a critical moment in the movement's struggle with the Yemeni government in 2005-2006. Badr al-Din threw his weight behind Abdalmalik, the oldest child of his second *sadah* bride and his ninth oldest son, who had joined him on more visits to Iran than any other son except Husayn and who was a gifted religious scholar and orator.³⁹ In the authors' assessment, this showed that the man entrusted with leadership of the Houthi movement had to share the same vision and experiences as Badr al-Din and Husayn—that is, pursuit of an Islamic Revolution modeled on Iran and Hezbollah.⁴⁰

Command Politics under Abdalmalik

In the view of the authors, the Houthi movement's current leader

- u The RAND study notes that “around 15,000 boys and young men had passed through Believing Youth camps each year,” adding that the Believing Youth were an ideal mechanism to groom a fighting cadre, noting: “that demographic base—or their younger siblings—went on to provide a recruitable hard core, susceptible (or vulnerable) to the masculine assertion furnished by resistance and armed activity ... the rituals or gatherings appropriated by the Houthis—where adolescents and young adults congregate together with ‘adult’ fighters—make ideal environments for socialization and recruitment of youth.” Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 254.
- v Al-Madani was born in 1977 in Muhatta, in Hajjar governorate, but he spent his youth as one of the most promising students of Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi in Sa`ada. He married one of Husayn's daughters (a *sharifa*, or daughter of a *sadah*) and gained a powerful reputation as a commander in all the six wars and the fighting since then. His brother Taha al-Madani, another very senior Houthi field commander, was killed in 2016, seemingly in Lahj. On May 20, 2021, al-Madani was sanctioned by the United States for threatening the peace, security, and stability of Yemen, followed by the United Nations on November 9, 2021. See “Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Official Overseeing Group's Offensive Operations,” U.S. Department of Treasury, May 20, 2021, and “Yusuf al-Madani,” United Nations Security Council, November 9, 2021. Details gathered from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- w Abu Ali is believed to have been born in 1984-1986 to a *sadah* family (al-Moayyed) from Dahyan, Sa`ada. His early arrest by the Saleh government in May 2005 for undertaking assassination and roadside bomb attacks in Sana'a suggests that (even in the early years of the war against the government) he had received covert operations training of a kind different from most Houthi tactical commanders. See “Houthis in Special Documents (6) . . . Report from the Counter-Terrorism Center on the crime for which Abu Ali al-Hakim, Fouad, Mohammed al-Imad and others were imprisoned,” Al Masdar Online, May 9, 2020. See also his U.N. and U.S. government sanctions designations at “Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim,” U.N. Security Council, November 7, 2014, and “Yemen-related designations,” U.S. Department of Treasury, November 10, 2014.

- x *Sadah* leadership (through religious authority) of *qabili* social groupings is an old and tested formula in northern Yemen. Adel Dashela, “Northern Yemeni Tribes during the Eras of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi Movement: A Comparative Study,” Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 16, 2022, pp. 3, 12, 13.
- y Mohammed was only released in 2006. Brandt, p. 172. Omar al-Amqi related from his interview with Mohammed Badr al-Din: “When I asked Mohammed why he didn't take over the leadership of the organization, he replied smiling: ‘I was in prison, and my brother Abdalmalik was a lieutenant of my father and close to him, and I was not released from prison until the situation is like this as you can see.’” See Omar al-Amqi, “Why didn't the Houthi leadership devolve to Mohammed Badreddine?” Al Masdar Online, April 11, 2010.

Abdalmalik al-Huthi has demonstrated personal leadership qualities that are without doubt impressive: He is ruthless, pragmatic, unemotional, charismatic, and effective at building networks of personal loyalty and control.⁴¹ In Abdalmalik's style of public talking, it is clear that he models himself closely on Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.^z The second to sixth wars against the Yemeni government in 2005-2010 saw Abdalmalik progressively develop and perfect his grasp over the military command structure.⁴² He toured the expanding frontlines of the war, and he successively sidelined older Houthi leaders of Husayn's generation and disowned involvement in their tribal feuds.^{aa} Instead, Abdalmalik cultivated a clique of younger "field commanders" (*qa'id maydan*)⁴³ closer to his own age but often (significantly) just younger than him and thus less senior than him in years as well as religious education.^{ab} These commanders were typically students of Husayn who had known each other in the Believing Youth camps and shared the formative experience of fighting in the six wars.⁴⁴

One of the better known field commanders was the aforementioned Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim (Abu Ali),⁴⁵ Abdalmalik's military second-in-command after the sidelining of the *qabili* commander Abdullah Eida al-Razzami by 2006.⁴⁶ Even accounting for some hyperbole and Abu Ali's active intimidation of the press (which may generate hagiographic treatment),⁴⁷ Abu Ali was (in 2006-2014) an unequaled military-political player with a track record of battlefield success.⁴⁸ Abu Ali gained in importance throughout the six wars^{ac} and then took on a pivotal role in the Houthi consolidation of power^{ad} after the collapse of the Yemeni government in the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011.^{ac} Abdalmalik also overcame Yusuf al-Madani's rivalry⁴⁹ and kept him and Yusuf's capable brother Taha as key field commanders, and Abdalmalik also

eventually thawed hard feelings with Abdallah Eida al-Razzami by supporting the ambitions of al-Razzami's eldest son, Yahya.^{af}

Thus, Abdalmalik built a cohesive and trusted command group by the end of the sixth war in 2010—almost all young men (like Abdalmalik) in their late twenties or early thirties, with very similar religious backgrounds cultivated in the Believing Youth movement, and with strong personal intra-group affinity within the *sadah* elite, forged from childhood and through war.⁵⁰ Others drawn from this "war generation" are Abdalmalik's full brother Abdalkhaliq, a few years younger than him,⁵¹ and Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, a close first cousin of Abdalmalik, born just after Abdalmalik, who also emerged as a key advisor to Abdalmalik on social and political matters.⁵²

In the authors' assessment, this command cadre—the war generation, molded in their twenties as the six wars raged—are today the heart of the Houthi military and regime security command and control structure. They did not have much memory of the Zaydi revivalist movement before Husayn, before the Believing Youth camps, before Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah military support, and before the "the scream" (*al-shi'ar*).⁵³ In that sense, they are exactly what Husayn named them: the "followers of the slogan" (*Ashab al-Shi'ar*).⁵⁴

Abdalmalik kept these men alongside him as the Houthi movement transitioned from insurgents in 2010 to co-equals in the post-Arab Spring National Dialogue Conference between March 2013 and January 2014,⁵⁵ and finally to the rulers of northern Yemen after their September 2014 coup against the U.N.-backed government.⁵⁶ Yet, Abdalmalik also kept three influential older men in his military and security decision-making circle, and these may be particularly influential. One was Ahmed Mohammed Yahya Hamid (known as Ahmed Hamid or Abu Mahfouz), a key follower

z In the authors' assessment, Abdalmalik deliberately uses the same calm tone as Nasrallah, inflecting and raising his voice only in specific phrases to fire up the audience in a way that mimics the Hezbollah leader. In addition to rhetorical similarities, they both wear a ring on the little finger of their right hands, often appear in front of the same blue background, and constantly praise each other in letters. For an example of similar rhetorical styles, see "Hezbollah and Ansar Allah, the Soldiers of God that strike in the ground," YouTube, October 12, 2016. Qom-trained theologian Mehdi Khalaji has also noted Abdalmalik's apparent fascination with Nasrallah. See Khalaji.

aa For instance, in March 2005-June 2007 (2nd to 4th war) feuding between al-Razzami and the Al Mahdi clans, Abdalmalik distanced himself and explicitly did not support his father's friend, al-Razzami. Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 185, 309. See also Brandt, pp. 122, 129-130.

ab In the authors' collective view, this is significant. Age is important in the Arab world. Even a few years' seniority in age between men gives a kind of precedence that can be exploited by the elder man.

ac Abu Ali was in prison in 2005, before breaking out on January 27, 2006. See Brandt, p. 189. Thereafter, Abu Ali was critical in many fronts, especially late-war fighting in 2009-2010 in Manabbih. See Brandt, pp., 297, 304-305.

ad Abu Ali is also believed to have played a major role in establishing the Houthi tactic of setting up local supervisors (*mushrifeen*) across all districts in Yemen and within all ministries and major military units, akin to a political commissar system of surveillance and parallel authority. See Adnan al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis? The hidden structures and key leaders who actually run the organization," Al Masdar Online English, March 14, 2022.

ae Abu Ali was described by Brandt as the key military player in post-2010 Houthi takeovers and tribal fighting in Dammaj, Amran, and Sana'a. See Brandt, pp. 279-280, 334-335.

af Yahya appears to have been born in 1987, making him in his mid-thirties now, while his father Abdullah Eida al-Razzami is in his mid-sixties. See Gregory D. Johnsen, "The Kingpin of Sana'a – A Profile of Ahmed Hamed," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 18, 2021. In May 2022, Yahya was appointed head of a Houthi delegation sent to Amman, Jordan, to negotiate with the internationally recognized government over the reopening of roads in Taiz, as part of the U.N.-brokered truce that started in April 2022 (and which has lapsed since October 2, 2022, at the time of writing). Adnan al-Gabarni, "Why did al-Houthi choose Yahya al-Razami as a representative in the negotiations to lift the siege of Taiz?" Al Masdar Online, May 27, 2022.

ag As Al Masdar Online has chronicled in great detail, the Houthi shadow government represents a parallel system of supervisory bodies in which real policy-making authority is vested, under which the formal Yemeni government architecture exists to execute Houthi orders. Under Abdalmalik's Office of the Sayyed, there is the General Council, Executive Council Supreme Political Council, Government Work Authority, Governorate Affairs Council, Judicial Council, and Tribal Cohesion Council. These are almost all run by Abdalmalik's hand-picked cadre of thirty-somethings: for instance, a close confidante Safar al-Sufi at the General Council; groomed Abdalmalik loyalist Qassem al-Humran at the Executive Council; Abdalmalik's friend Mahdi al-Mashat at the Supreme Political Council; Mahmoud al-Junaid at the Government Works Authority; plus Mohammed Abdalsalam and Abdalmalik al-Ajri as his foreign representatives and spokesmen. As with any rule, there are exceptions—one being the involvement of Husayn-era leaders like Mohsen al-Hamzi (Judicial Council head) and Saleh Mesfir Farhan al-Shaer (judicial guardian of confiscated properties) under Abdalmalik. See al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?" Details also topped up with interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

of Husayn^{ah} who is the director of the President of the Supreme Political Council Mahdi al-Mashat's office and the powerful Government Works Authority,⁵⁶ and is a few years older than Abdalmalik.^{ai} According to Gregory Johnsen's research, it was Ahmed Hamid who lobbied for Badr al-Din to hold open the leadership role for Abdalmalik in his early years as the 'prince regent' of the Houthi movement in 2005-2010.⁵⁷ The second older advisor with direct access to Abdalmalik is Ahsan al-Humran (detailed below), who heads Abdalmalik's Preventative Security (*al-Amn al-Waqa'i*) chief⁵⁸ and oversees the Houthi intelligence agencies.⁵⁹ A third older figure—and the only one drawn from outside Abdalmalik's circle—is Abdalkarim Amir al-Din, a much younger brother of Badr al-Din^{aj} and thus an uncle to Abdalmalik who is about 14 years older than him.^{ak} Abdalkarim is the Minister of Interior in the Houthi-controlled Sana'a government with close ties to the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah.⁶⁰ But even in this case, Abdalmalik's people seem to be slowly taking over: The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has been brought under the supervision of Ahsan al-Humran, and one of Husayn's own sons, Ali, is positioned to succeed Abdalkarim at the MoI.^{al}

Abdalmalik's Jihad Council

The first three years of Houthi control of Sana'a and northern and western Yemen in 2014-2017 represented an uneasy partnership between the Houthis and their co-conspirator in the 2014 takeover, ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh.⁶¹ This changed in December 2017 when long-standing tensions boiled over between Saleh's forces and the Houthis, with Saleh being killed by Houthi forces on December 4, 2017,⁶² allowing the Houthis full and unfettered control of the Sana'a-based government and military for the first time.⁶³

In the reorganization that followed, the Houthis' Jihad Council, the movement's supreme command authority, became more

ah Greg Johnsen says Ahmed Hamid was born in 1972 and was the key backer of Abdalmalik as the successor to Husayn, energizing others to push Abdalmalik's takeover. See Johnsen.

ai The United Nations reported in 2021 that Ahmed Hamid leads the Supreme Political Committee of the Houthi movement (its politburo, in effect) and the Houthi-controlled Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (SCMCHA), where he oversees "intimidation of opponents, corruption activities including the diversion of humanitarian aid." See "Letter dated 22 January 2021 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, January 25, 2021, p. 17. See also Johnsen.

aj Badr al-Din al-Huthi was born in the early 1920s while his brother Abdalkarim was born around 1965, making him slightly younger than (his nephew) Husayn Badr al-Din (born in 1956 or 1959). Brandt, p. 172; Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 106.

ak Abdalkarim is regularly mentioned as one of the top three power blocs within the Houthi movement. See Johnsen. See also Abdalkarim's involvement with the *mushrifeen* system in "The Houthi Supervisory System," Yemen Analysis Hub, ACAPS, June 17, 2020, p. 3. One report places Abdalkarim as Abdalmalik's designated successor. See "Abdel Malik al-Houthi Chooses His Uncle to Succeed Him," Asharq Al-Awsat, September 16, 2018.

al Colonel Ali Husayn al-Huthi, Husayn Badr al-Din's son, is currently the commander of police forces, which is a deputy ministerial role that typically leads to appointment as minister. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

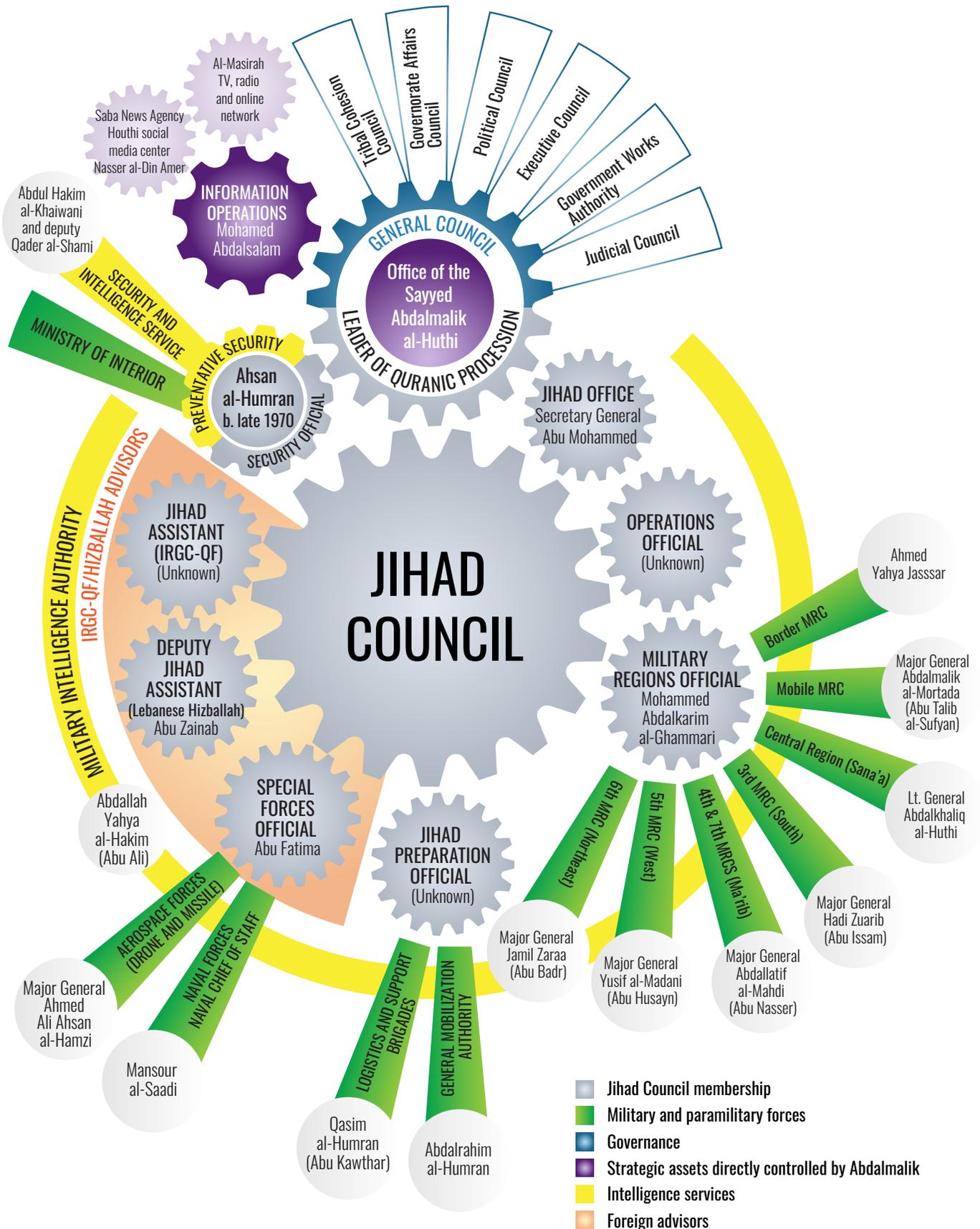
"The Houthi Jihad Council bears an unmistakable similarity to Lebanese Hezbollah's own Jihad Council, including the centralization of intelligence and counter-intelligence functions at Jihad Council level."

visible.⁶⁴ This body had existed since 2010 or 2011, coincident with the sixth Sa`da war (and growing IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah involvement).⁶⁵ It was a well-kept secret until around 2018, when testimony of its existence started to slip out with Saleh loyalist defectors and enhanced scrutiny of the Houthi leadership.⁶⁶ With Saleh dead, the Jihad Council, consisting of approximately nine members, now exercised its authority without disturbance by its former ally. The Houthi Jihad Council bears an unmistakable similarity to Lebanese Hezbollah's own Jihad Council,⁶⁷ including the centralization of intelligence and counter-intelligence functions at Jihad Council level.⁶⁸ Like Hezbollah's Jihad Council (which is loosely overseen by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah),⁶⁹ the Houthi Jihad Council is formally led by the overall movement's leader, in this case Abdalmalik al-Huthi, who has been styled "the Leader of the Quranic Procession."⁷⁰ In the authors' assessment, there is a lot of anecdotal evidence that Abdalmalik rarely—if ever—physically meets with all the Jihad Council due to the stringent security precautions he takes, in which the leader remains distant and meets almost no other Houthi leaders^{am} except perhaps Ahmed Hamid and Ahsan al-Humran.⁷¹

The Houthi Jihad Council has a small secretariat, the Jihad Office, which is led by an Abdalmalik loyalist known as (secretary general or rapporteur) Abu Mohammed.^{an} Aside from an Iranian and Lebanese representative (see below), the remaining full members of the Jihad Council include an observer from the General Council (who also represents the Executive Council); the Operations Official; the Military Regions Official; the Jihad Preparation Official; the Special Forces Official; and the Security

am "Distant" is a word that recurs in interviews with Yemenis who have insight into Abdalmalik's leadership style since he formally replaced Badr al-Din as the Houthi leader in 2010. Based on the preponderance of evidence from interviews, all major military and security decisions go to Abdalmalik for approval via the Jihad Office secretariat, the General Council, and the Office of the Sayyed. Physical threat may be a factor because of the increased risk of geo-location and targeting by precision weapons when Saudi Arabia became directly involved in fighting the Houthis. Iranian and Hezbollah protective security training may be a related factor as well. Security protocols surrounding Abdalmalik are extraordinarily thorough, rivaling and resembling those around Lebanese Hezbollah commander Hassan Nasrallah. According to Marieke Brandt, these precautions began in December 2008, which is logical as it was just ahead of the sixth war and at a point when the Houthis were attracting more support from Lebanese Hezbollah. See Brandt, pp. 309, 314. Some details also provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

an Abu Mohammed is known to be a former student of Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi and a *sadah* from the Houthi home province of Sa`ada. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.



Organizational structure of the Houthi military and security apparatus
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Official.⁷² As later sections will detail, the Operations and Military Regions officials assist with operational coordination functions across the different geographic military zones.⁷³ Also discussed in following sections below, the Jihad Preparation Official focuses on recruitment, indoctrination, and force generation issues.⁷⁴

Mohammed Abdal Salam,^{ao} a close contact of Abdalmalik al-Huthi, sometimes attends the Jihad Council, seemingly in his non-public role as the head of Houthi media operations.⁷⁵ Known best as the primary (Oman-based) point of contact between the Houthi movement and foreign journalists and think-tanks,⁷⁶ Abdal Salam is the founding father of Houthi propaganda and disinformation capabilities.⁷⁷ Working closely with the Iran-established Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU)⁷⁸ and Lebanese Hezbollah media organs,⁷⁹ Abdal Salam and Houthi Information Minister Dhaif Allah al-Shami⁸⁰ have built out what the authors' assess to be one of the most powerful Houthi strategic attack capabilities, namely its raft of television, radio, and social media broadcasters.⁸¹ As well as controlling and censoring landline and cellular mobile internet inside Houthi-controlled Yemen,^{ap} the Houthis have developed a powerful offensive capability aimed at controlling the international narrative surrounding the conflict in Yemen, which has sometimes achieved decisive strategic results.^{aq} In addition to strong support from most of IRTVU's members in television and radio,^{ar} the Houthis directly control their own Beirut-based Al-Masirah satellite television station and the Sana'a headquarters of Yemen's SABA News agency.⁸² Abdal Salam has a deputy, SABA News director Nasser al-Din Amer,^{as} who heads up social media operations via a dedicated social media center.^{at} This operation includes the centralized creation of messaging and hashtag campaigns, with well-managed "Twitter banks" of prepared content for crowds of supporters to draw upon and amplify, including with instructions of how to avoid being detected as bots by Twitter

ao His real name is Abdal Salam Salah Falita. Provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

ap The Houthis control the .ye domain through their physical control of internet landlines entering Yemen at Hodeida and the backbone inside northern Yemen. They employ sophisticated censorship tools (such as Netsweeper). See Elias Groll, "The Other War in Yemen—for Control of the Country's Internet," *Foreign Policy*, November 28, 2018, and Robert Muggah, "Yemen's Parallel War in Cyberspace," *Foreign Policy*, January 6, 2022.

aq In the authors' collective experience, Houthi information operations and strategic propaganda efforts were ultimately more effective than the Houthi armed forces in stopping the UAE-backed Hodeida offensive in 2018. While Houthi defenses were crumbling on the ground, the real pressure that stopped the anti-Houthi advance came in the way the fighting was framed and presented to U.S. congressional leaders via the media and think-tanks (i.e., as a threat to humanitarian access and an insurmountable military challenge). This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

ar Notably Iranian state television and radio, plus Hezbollah's Al-Manar, Al-Mayadin, and Al-Sahat. A comprehensive listing is provided in Abdo Albahesh, "The Relations of Houthis with Iran and Hezbollah," Medium, November 4, 2018.

as Amer is also the Undersecretary of Yemen's Ministry of Interior. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

at Twitter is the Houthi's most prolific social media type, followed by Facebook, YouTube, and other websites, and lastly Telegram. See Groll.

content algorithms.⁸³ As is the case in Iraq,⁸⁴ Lebanese Hezbollah's Arabic-fluent media advisors seem to have played a long-standing role in building out Houthi information operation capabilities.^{au}

The Special Forces Official represents the so-called "qualitative forces" such as missile and drone forces, naval capabilities, and technical training programs.⁸⁵ These are strategic capabilities that are commanded directly by the Jihad Council.⁸⁶ Historically, these Special Forces Officials are only usually identified after their death: One was Hamud al-Ghumran, who died in combat around 2017;⁸⁷ the next was Hasan al-Jaradi⁸⁸ (Abu Shahid^{av}), a combat veteran from the very heart of Sa`da who was killed in Hodeida in 2018;^{aw} and a final official called Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Humran was killed on the Marib frontline (at Sirwah) in 2020.⁸⁹ The current Special Forces Official appears to be known only as Abu Fatima.⁹⁰

The aforementioned Security Official (Ahsan al-Humran)⁹¹ appears to be dual-hatted as the head of the Preventative Security body, which oversees all the other intelligence agencies^{ax} (with the

au Lebanese Hezbollah liaison officers appear to be (at the time of publication) led by Hezbollah operative Husayn al-Dirani, who has supported Houthi information operations for many years and who works closely with two Yemenis: Amer al-Amer al-Marani, a former deputy director of the National Security Bureau under the Houthi, and Mohammed Ghali al-Battal. Al-Dirani is reported by the authors' contacts to be an assistant to senior Lebanese Hezbollah member and U.S.-designated terrorist Khalil Yusif Harb (Abu Mustafa). In 2013, Lebanese Hezbollah member Khalil Yusif Harb was added to the Specially Designated Nationals List for terrorism through Executive Order 13224. See "Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Leadership," U.S. Department of the Treasury, August 22, 2013. Other details on al-Dirani, al-Marani, and al-Battal provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

av Abu Shahid is an unusual *kunya*, meaning "father of the martyrs." In a movement where nearly every fighter had lost family members, this is a remarkable honor. Abu Shahid apparently lost his father, brothers, and son before he himself died. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

aw Abu Shahid was from the Juma'ah area of Sa`ada, the exact wellspring of Badr al-Din al-Huthi's family networks. Abu Shahid fought in some of the six wars, then at Tai'zz in 2015, and against the Saleh forces in 2017. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

ax The Houthis folded the two long-standing intelligence agencies (Political Security organization or PSO, and the National Security Bureau or NSB) into a single agency called the Security and Intelligence Service in September 2019. The Security and Intelligence Service is led by former Deputy Minister of Interior Abdul Hakim al-Khaiwani and his deputy, former PSO chief Qader al-Shami. On December 10, 2020, both men were designated by the U.S. Department of the Treasury under Executive Order (E.O.) 13818 and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act for "serious human rights abuse." See "Treasury Sanctions Serious Human Rights Abusers on International Human Rights Day," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 10, 2020.

possible exception of Military Intelligence^{ay}). Preventative Security serves the same specialized leadership protection and regime security role as the Protective Security in Lebanese Hezbollah's Jihad Council.^{az} Ahsan al-Humran was a young loyalist to Husayn Badr al-Din who is just a few years older than Abdalmalik.^{ba} He is one of many Humran family members in Husayn and Abdalmalik's inner circles.⁹² (The Humran are a *sadah* family that traces descent to the Prophet.⁹³) Ahsan al-Humran, one of the earliest Houthi commanders, replaced Abdalmalik's long-term Preventative Security chief Abu Taha^{bb} when the latter was removed during the intelligence reorganization in September 2019.^{bc}

The IRGC Jihad Assistant and his Lebanese Hezbollah Deputy

It is no secret that the IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) and Lebanese Hezbollah supported Houthi territorial expansionism and military operations: In addition

to U.N.^{bd} and U.S.^{be} statements to this effect, the IRGC-QF itself admits to its support.^{bf} Alongside Abdalmalik, the IRGC-QF "Jihad Assistant" and his Lebanese Hezbollah deputy make up a triad at the heart of the Houthi war machine.⁹⁴ IRGC-QF uses the same moniker—"Jihad Assistant"^{bg}—in Iraq to describe its senior liaison officer with the top-tier Iraqi Shi'a terrorist group Kata'ib Hezbollah.⁹⁵ Also similar to the Houthi case, the Jihad Assistant in Iraq has a Lebanese Hezbollah deputy, suggesting a kind of rough template in IRGC-QF interactions with partners and proxies.⁹⁶ (In Lebanon, the Jihad Assistant is Lebanese^{bb} and the title of the IRGC-QF senior advisor is unclear.) The key point is that the Jihad Assistant is always the senior military advisor to the leader,^{bi} and in the case of Abdalmalik al-Huthi, this is an Iranian IRGC-QF officer with a Lebanese Hezbollah deputy.⁹⁷

The exact nature of the relationship between Abdalmalik and

ay In the authors' collective assessment, it seems unlikely that the current head of the Military Intelligence Authority, the veteran fighter Abdullah al-Hakim (Abu Ali), is taking orders from anyone below Abdalmalik al-Huthi. He has an unrivaled record in solving tribal disputes and is probably one of the Houthi leaders who is left to manage his own affairs, which are focused on regime security engagements with tribal leaders. That being said, almost no one is a "direct report" to Abdalmalik due to operational security concerns, suggesting that Abdullah al-Hakim (who does not sit on the Jihad Council as a full member) may be represented in that forum by Ahsan al-Humran, the key intelligence official. Abu Ali's deputy at the Military Intelligence Authority is Mohammed Husayn Hashem (Abu Huriya). Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

az Lebanese Hezbollah holds leadership protective security, counter-intelligence, central information datasets, and surveillance capabilities at Jihad Council level. Matt Levitt, "Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 4, 2013, p. 14.

ba Ahsan al-Humran appears to have been born in the late 1970s. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bb Abu Taha's real name is reported by multiple contacts to be Abdulrab Jarfan, the Houthi leader placed over the National Security Bureau (NSB) when Sana'a fell to the Houthis in 2014. He is reported to have run protective security for Houthi leaders after Husayn's death. He is reported to have married a niece of Abdalmalik. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bc According to local contacts, NSB head Abu Taha (Abdulrab Jarfan), NSB deputy head Abu Imad (Mutlaq al-Marani), and Political Security Organization chief Qader al-Shami were all removed due to chronic infighting and their services merged under new leadership (though al-Shami was retained in a new deputy intelligence chief role). Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bd According to the United Nations, Iran is responsible for both financial and weapons transfers to the Houthis. For instance, based on the design of the UAVs and the tracing of component parts, the U.N. panel of experts on Yemen concluded that the material necessary to assemble the Qasef-1s "emanated from the Islamic Republic of Iran." "Letter dated 26 January 2018 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by Security Council resolution 2342 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, January 26, 2018, p. 32. See also Carole Landry, "UN panel finds further evidence of Iran link to Yemen missiles," Agence France-Presse, July 31, 2018.

be To give a recent example, Tim Lenderking, U.S. envoy to Yemen for the Biden administration, noted in April 2021: "What I see is continued aiding and abetting an army of Houthis by the Iranians so that they can continue attacking Saudi Arabia, and unfortunately those attacks have risen quite strongly in the last couple of months." Michelle Nichols and Jonathan Landay, "Iran provides Yemen's Houthis 'lethal' support, U.S. official says," Reuters, April 21, 2021.

bf IRGC-QF assistant commander Rostam Ghasemi explained the advisory effort in some detail to Russian Today TV on April 21, 2021. See "Qods Force Official Rostam Ghasemi: Iran's Friends In The Region Have Retaliated Against Israel And Will Continue To Do So: We Have A Few Military Advisors In Yemen And Have Provided Weapon-Manufacturing Technology To The Yemenis," April 21, 2021. One Houthi commander, Abdullah al-Mahdoon, also spoke publicly about Iranian provision of military equipment and training. Al-Mahdoon noted that "local [Yemeni] trainers were trained in Lebanon and Iran on how to collect and construct the pieces of missiles and how to manufacture mines." He added that "external experts and trainers from the Lebanese Shiite Hizbollah, and al-Qods legion of Iran supervise local Yemeni cadres." Al-Mahdoon also said that "there are several secret centers for manufacturing weapons and many other centers for training." He confirmed that "these centers are equipped with modern machines to manufacture all kinds of weapons." See AlBahesh.

bg For instance, the IRGC-QF Jihad Assistant for Iraq is Brigadier General Hajji Hamid Nasser. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bh Imad Mughniyeh and then Mustafa Badreddine held the role. Shimon Shapira, "The Struggle between Israel and Hizbullah, 1982-2020," Tablet, August 11, 2020.

bi Some Iran-backed groups also describe the main assistant to the military leader as the jihad assistant. See Basra-based MP Faleh al-Khaz'ali, who acts as the jihadi assistant for Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada. Another Iraqi individual called Adnan al-Bendawi is the jihadi assistant to Iraqi Shi'a militia Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021 and 2022; exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. For a profile of Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba, see Michael Knights, "Profile: Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 27, 2021.

the Jihad Assistant is obviously a well-guarded secret, but careful interviewing with persons at the edges of the Houthi security establishment can begin to build an intriguing picture.⁹⁸ Though the exact identity of the current Jihad Assistant is not yet publicly known, a previous IRGC-QF official to play the role was IRGC-QF Brigadier General Abdalreza Shahla'i.^{bj} As in Iraq, the Jihad Assistant is a brigadier general. His role is to advise the Houthi leader in “the path of strategic jihadist and military actions” and to “be a partner in making military decisions.”⁹⁹ In terms of Iranian influence over key Houthi strategic decisions—such as entering or leaving ceasefires, or undertaking strategic attacks on Gulf States—there is no reliable data. In the authors’ assessment, Iran’s Jihad Assistant and Abdalmalik’s inner circle have strong incentives to conceal any evidence of Iranian influence in order to avoid damaging Abdalmalik’s credibility as a free-standing Yemeni leader.¹⁰⁰ Where Iran uses its influence, it may often be to preach caution and the avoidance of over-reach and anecdotal evidence suggests Iran does tend to look nervously on major Houthi offensive actions.^{bk}

The Jihad Council format was developed by Lebanese Hezbollah in order to communicate lessons learned across the group,¹⁰¹ and it might reasonably be expected to play this role in Yemen as well.¹⁰² The council might also logically provide a safe, economical, and unobtrusive way for the IRGC-QF to advise the Houthi movement.^{bl} The Jihad Assistant also decides what kind of Iranian and Hezbollah technical assistance and hardware to provide, both using in-country training teams and stores, or by requesting new specialists or materiel from Iran and Lebanon.¹⁰³ A small IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah staff, now reportedly numbering in the tens, not the hundreds,¹⁰⁴ manages the practical arrangements, including advising on the operation of a small set of military industries.¹⁰⁵

Lebanese Hezbollah’s deputy Jihad Assistant on the Houthi Jihad Council—currently an officer known as Abu Zainab¹⁰⁶—has a more prominent role in practical training and equipping tasks.¹⁰⁷ As noted by one of the authors (Knights) in a 2018 *CTC Sentinel* article on Houthi military operations,¹⁰⁸ Lebanese Hezbollah advisors have long had more freedom of movement in Houthi areas of Yemen than Iranians.¹⁰⁹ The Houthis appear less sensitive about Hezbollah involvement than about Iranian presence, possibly because Hezbollah is seen as an (elder) sister organization to Ansar Allah,

“The Jihad Council format was developed by Lebanese Hezbollah in order to communicate lessons learned across the group, and it might reasonably be expected to play this role in Yemen as well. The council might also logically provide a safe, economical, and unobtrusive way for the IRGC-QF to advise the Houthi movement.”

while Iran is a foreign nation.¹¹⁰ Hezbollah’s Arabs (as opposed to Iranian Persians) can also blend in more easily with Houthi hosts and seem to have fewer operational security restrictions, allowing their advisors to visit the frontlines and move around the military zones.¹¹¹

Overall, analysts might profitably reassess the longevity of Hezbollah military support to the Houthis, looking further back prior to 2010. Hezbollah itself has spoken of providing military advice to the Houthis as far back as 1992,^{bm} but the major intensification might logically have occurred after the Hezbollah tactical victories over Israel in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war and the skyrocketing of Hezbollah’s regional reputation.¹¹² IRGC-QF appears to have based its earliest military assistance efforts to the Houthis out of Lebanon under the leadership of an IRGC-QF representative known as Abu Hadi¹¹³ and in partnership with Lebanese Hezbollah senior operative Khalil Yusif Harb.^{114 bn} There are scattered but growing indicators of Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah sponsorship of the Houthis in the fourth, fifth, and sixth wars against the Yemeni government in 2008-2010.^{bo} These

bj Abdul Reza Shahla'i (also known as Yusuf Abu al-Karkh and Hajji Yusef) has been designated by the United States for threatening the peace and stability of Iraq (in 2008) and then as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (in 2011) for aiding attacks on the United States. The United States offered a \$15 million bounty for Abdul Reza Shahla'i in December 2019 and tried to kill Shahla'i with an airstrike on January 3, 2020. See “Rewards for Justice: Abdul Reza Shahla'i,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, and James Gordon Meek, Luis Martinez, and Elizabeth McLaughlin, “US tried to kill Iranian commander in Yemen same night as Soleimani strike: Officials,” ABC News, January 10, 2020.

bk For instance, in advising caution when the Houthis wanted to surge forward and attack Sana'a, Aden, and Ma'rib in 2014-2015. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bl Considering operational security and political concerns (i.e., Houthi sensitivity to being seen to be foreign-advised), the Jihad Assistant and his team will likely seek to keep a low profile and not be widely seen or met. This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

bm Matthew Levitt ascribes Unit 3800, Hezbollah’s external special operations arm, with taking on an advise and assist role in Yemen after the Arab Spring in 2011. Levitt, pp. 288, 381, 395. The U.S. government likewise described a Hezbollah advise and assist effort from 2012 onward. See the National Security Advisor’s comments in 2012 in Karen DeYoung, “Europe Should Label Hezbollah a Terrorist Group, U.S. Urges,” *Washington Post*, October 26, 2012.

bn In 2013, Lebanese Hezbollah member Khalil Yusif Harb was added to the Specially Designated Nations list for terrorism through Executive Order 13224. See “Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Leadership,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, August 22, 2013.

bo These include sophisticated propaganda and media operations; rapid evolution of commando raiding tactics and offensive mining techniques from the fourth war onward; growing reports of maritime arms deliveries; movements of Iranian mother ships in the Red Sea; and Yemeni government detention of Lebanese and Iranian personnel in Houthi areas. See Michael Knights, “The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture,” *CTC Sentinel* 11:8 (2018). One Houthi leader, Abdullah al-Mahdoun, spoke of arms and funds arriving in time for the fourth war (in 2006-2007). See Albahesh.

appear to be the leading edge of Hezbollah advising^{bp} and IRGC-QF equipping^{bq} of Houthi fighting units. Indeed, upon taking over Sana'a in September 2014, an early Houthi priority was the release of Hezbollah captives from government prisons, as well as Iranian nationals seized while delivering arms to the Houthis in 2013.^{br}

Administration of the Houthi-controlled Military

When the September 21, 2014, Peace and National Partnership Agreement was signed on the day the Houthis seized Sana'a as a last ditch effort to save the post-Arab Spring peace process,¹¹⁵ the Houthis sought the integration of around 40,000 Houthi fighters into the state security forces, and the emplacement of a Houthi with familial links to the army, Zakaria al-Shami, as the deputy chief of staff of the Yemeni Ministry of Defense (MoD).¹¹⁶ After overrunning Sana'a in the coup of September 2014, the Houthis went further, directly controlling the MoD and MoI for the first time.¹¹⁷ In the latter, a slow-burning struggle for control of the police forces began between loyalists of Ali Abdallah Saleh, eventually ending with Saleh's death at the hands of the Houthis in December 2017 and the appointment of Abdalkarim al-Houthi as Minister of Interior in 2019.¹¹⁷ In the MoD, the Houthis progressively co-opted Saleh-era generals^{bt} to serve alongside (and quickly under) senior Houthis.

bp Baraa Shaiban claims: "In late 2011 and early 2012, Iran initially handed the 'Yemeni file' over to Lebanon's Hizbollah to manage it, as Hizbollah is more familiar with the Arab world. Hizbollah then started organizing seminars and conferences for Yemeni youth activists. The Houthis were the main point of contact on the ground for Hizbollah's recruiting efforts of Yemenis from all backgrounds. In Lebanon, the handler of the Yemeni delegations is a man called 'Abu Mustafa.' His real name is Khalil Yusuf Harb." Baraa Shaiban, "Yemen's Clash of Two Revolutions," Hudson Institute, April 4, 2021.

bq As noted in one of the author's (Knights) September 2018 *CTC Sentinel* article: "The January 2013 interception of the Jihan-1 dhow suggests a powerful post-2011 effort by Iran to arm Ansar Allah in the same manner Iran has armed Lebanese Hizbollah." See Knights, "The Houthi War Machine" and also "Yemenis intercept 'Iranian ship,'" BBC, October 27, 2009, as well as Oren Dorell, "Iranian support for Yemen's Houthis goes back years," *USA Today*, April 20, 2015, and C. J. Chivers and Robert Worth, "Seizure of Antiaircraft Missiles in Yemen Raises Fears That Iran Is Arming Rebels There," *New York Times*, February 8, 2013. See also "Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1929 (2010)," United Nations Security Council, June 2013, pp. 14-15.

br For instance, Abdulaziz Mahrous, who Al Masdar reported as leading smuggling operations in the Gulf of Aden in 2021, "was among the crew arrested during the capture of the Iranian ship 'Jihan-1' in 2013. The Houthis released him four days after seizing control of Sana'a in a coup d'etat in late September 2014." Fares al-Suraihi and Alkhatib Alrawhani, "Special Report: How Iran smuggles weapons to Yemen," Al Masdar Online English, May 9, 2021.

bs Even critics of the post-2015 war in Yemen call the Houthi takeover a "coup." For example, see Mareike Transfeld, "Peace and State Fragmentation in Yemen," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 22, 2019.

bt With enough digging, some patterns appear in the practice of co-option. More trusted Saleh-era officers may come from families connected to the Khawlan tribal areas in Sa'ada (one example being serving Minister of Defense Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi). One deputy chief of staff of the MoD (Yahya Mohammed al-Shami) was trusted because his father (Major General Mohammed Abdalmalik al-Shami) died in the same March 20, 2015, mosque bombing as many Houthi officers. Zakaria al-Shami, an early Houthi embed at MoD prior to the Houthi coup in 2014, was linked by his father to the Yemeni army. Details gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

The most famous turncoat was the Houthi-installed Minister of Defense (at the time of publication) Staff Major General Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi,^{bu} who attended Houthi ideological re-education, swore an oath of allegiance on the Qur'an, and plays an active part in Houthi propaganda operations.^{bv} Of interest, the Houthis have not made sudden or sweeping changes to the Yemeni military and go to some lengths to portray this national institution as unchanged,^{bw} an effort of uncertain success to hide the influence of the Jihad Council and minimize negative reaction from the military classes and other nationalists.¹¹⁸

The power behind the minister's throne at MoD appears to be Staff Lieutenant General^{bx} Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghamhari (informally known as Hashim al-Ghamhari),¹¹⁹ who was designated by the United States and the United Nations in 2021 for threatening the peace and stability of Yemen through his role in procuring and deploying explosives, drones, and missiles against targets inside and outside of Yemen.^{by} Born in 1981,^{bz} al-Ghamhari

bu Major General Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi was one of Saleh's most trusted and capable commanders, in command of the elite Missile Batteries Group, controlling Yemen's medium-range ballistic missiles and accurate short-range ballistic missiles. Charles Caris, "Yemen Order of Battle," Institute for the Study of War, February 23, 2015.

bv Houthi Minister of Defense Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi said in the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim, a few days after a drone attack on Abu Dhabi, that "painful and terrifying strikes" were to be expected in the "strategic, military and economic depth of the coalition countries." See Maryam Sinaee, "Houthi General Tells IRGC-Linked Website Of Coming Attacks On UAE," Iran International, January 30, 2022. Details also topped up with interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bw For instance, many Houthi senior military commanders (such as Abdullah al-Hakim (Abu Ali) and Yusuf al-Madani) have taken to wearing formal uniforms and obeying rank conventions—for instance, not wearing red staff 'tabs' (epaulette) if they have not attended staff college. (Abdalmalik is an exception, wearing staff tabs on his field marshal's uniform.) Equally interesting, the Houthis seem to have inflated the general officer rank structure one level—meaning that Yemeni officers wearing, for example, brigadier general rank badges are now one level higher (i.e., brigadier generals are referred to as major generals). This grants a promotion and salary and pension benefits to remaining serving and retired Saleh-era officers. Thus, a Houthi general wearing the same rank badges as a general of the U.N.-backed PLC is almost always reported to be one rank higher. Authors' survey of articles showing imagery of tank badges and text description of ranks.

bx Al-Ghamhari is an example of the inflation of general officer ranks: He wears insignia of a major general, but is accorded the rank of lieutenant general. Authors' survey of articles showing imagery of tank badges and text description of ranks.

by The U.S. Treasury assesses: "As the Head of the General Staff of the Houthi armed forces, the most senior commander within the Houthi military leadership structure, Al-Ghamari is directly responsible for overseeing Houthi military operations that have destroyed civilian infrastructure and Yemen's neighbors, specifically Saudi Arabia and the UAE. He directs the procurement and deployment of various weapons, including improvised explosive devices, ammunition, and UAVs [Unmanned Aerial Vehicles]. Al-Ghamari has also overseen Houthi UAV and missile attacks against Saudi Arabian targets. Al-Ghamari reportedly received his military training in Houthi militia camps run by Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps." See "Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Official Overseeing Group's Offensive Operations."

bz Al-Ghamhari's birthdate is variously given as between 1979 and 1984. The authors believe, based on their contacts, that it is 1981. Drawn from details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

is one of Abdalmalik's generation, who was born in Al-Ahnum (then in Hajja governorate, but now in Amran) but grew up in Sa`da and received subsidized tuition from Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi at the Believing Youth camps.^{ca} Interestingly, al-Ghammari had long been a beneficiary of the MoD as his father had died (accidentally, in a fire)¹²⁰ while serving as a civilian in the MoD, meaning that he held an honorary rank simply to continue drawing his father's income for the family.¹²¹ At the same time, in actuality, al-Ghammari was serving with the Houthi forces throughout the six wars, specializing in the production of landmines and improvised explosive devices in Sa`da, and having received Iranian training in explosives-handling.¹²² From 2014 onward, he worked at senior levels in MoD and became the senior Houthi in the ministry, working with a team of deputies led by Major General Ali Hamud al-Moshaki, a Houthi from a *sadah* family in Dhamar governorate.¹²³

Yemen's MoD was hardly a model of efficiency in the best of times,¹²⁴ let alone under post-2014 conditions of blockade and with the ministry's functions bifurcated between Houthi-held and government-held areas.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, the ministry still has utility as a cover for the Jihad Council and is allowed to claim public credit for some enabling functions: personnel, training, and equipping and sustaining armed forces. In the authors' collective view, the most important of these is the illicit procurement of military materiel from abroad, in violation of the U.N. arms embargo.¹²⁶ By combining the pioneering research undertaken by Al Masdar Online¹²⁷ with new interviews,¹²⁸ a quite full picture can be constructed regarding the leadership of Houthi procurement and smuggling activities. Working directly with Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghammari is his assistant for military logistics, Major General Saleh Mesfer Farhan al-Shaer (Abu Yaser),¹²⁹ a U.N. and U.S.-sanctioned Houthi official¹³⁰ from Al-Safra district in the east of Sa`da.¹³¹ Al-Shaer not only heads up MoD logistics, including smuggling operations, but also plays the role of "Judicial Custodian" of an estimated \$100 million worth of confiscated assets,^{cb} some of which are made available for military use.^{cc}

Under al-Shaer operates what appears to the authors to be a remarkably effective system for smuggling donated Iranian arms, technology, and fuel into Yemen,¹³² as well as providing the Houthis with a mechanism to control the profitable smuggling of civilian

items like medicine, food, cigarettes, spare parts, consumer goods, fertilizers, and pesticides.¹³³ Al Masdar Online¹³⁴ and various U.S. and U.N. reports¹³⁵ have done a perfectly good job of describing these operations in detail, so here, the authors will instead focus on command and control. Under al-Shaer is his deputy for procurement, Major General Mohammed Ahmed al-Talbi (Abu Jafar).¹³⁶ At the Iran end, two Houthi liaison officers play a major role in procurement: An enigmatic figure known only as "M. S. al-Moayad" was described in the Al Masdar Online research as "the top coordinator of the smuggling operations based outside of Yemen."¹³⁷ Said al-Jamal, another Yemeni residing in Iran, was sanctioned by the United States on June 10, 2021, for running a sanctions-evasion network involving shipping and money exchange companies.¹³⁸ A Yemen-based Houthi official Akram al-Jilani appears to coordinate a network of smuggling chiefs for the Red Sea (Ahmed Hels), the Gulf of Aden (Abdallah Mahrous), and the Gulf of Oman (Ibrahim Helwan and Ali al-Halhal).¹³⁹

Onshore, al-Talbi has a transshipment network that handles trucking of smuggled goods to their storage locations. This network appears to be led by Akram al-Jilani, plus an Iranian-trained Yemeni logistician Mansour Ahmed al-Saadi,¹⁴⁰ ^{cd} and (until his reassignment in September 2020)^{ce} an Iranian-trained former bodyguard of Abdalmalik's called Major General Hadi Mohammed al-Khawlani (Abu Ali).^{cf} Little is known in the unclassified realm about the exact laydown of the Houthi warehousing and transshipment system, but judging by numerous Saudi airstrikes on such locations, the system is extensive.^{cg} Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Houthis seem to have optimized the system to minimize the number of critical components that must be smuggled from Iran (complete weapons systems, ballistic missile fuel, guidance units, and quality high-explosives)¹⁴¹ and maximize local sourcing of military and dual-use materials.¹⁴² As noted in *CTC Sentinel* in September 2018, the military industries are likely limited to a few dozen warehouses, drone and missile workshops, landmine and sea mine production facilities, and training sites.¹⁴³

A final interesting aspect of MoD's role under the Houthis is

ca Al-Ghammari is described by interviewees and in Yemeni media articles as being prominent in Houthi bomb-making and training establishments since the first Sa`da war, and having attended training camps in Iran, Lebanon, and Syria during and since the six Sa`da wars. See "Mohammad al-Ghammari; the Houthi Leader Who conveyed the Iranian 'Revolutionary Guards' Experience to Yemen," Al-Estiklal Newspaper, September 19, 2022. Details also gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cb "Major General Saleh Mesfer Alshaer, a close ally of Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi, serves as both the commander of the Houthi-controlled military logistics support organization, where he assisted the Houthis in acquiring smuggled weapons, as well as the officer responsible for managing all assets and funds confiscated by the Houthis." "Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Officer Overseeing Group's Seizure of Opposition Property," U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 18, 2021.

cc Al-Shaer handles the mobilization of confiscated assets like vehicles, spare parts, fuel, consumables, tents, and many basic logistical items from his stores of confiscated material. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cd Al-Saadi was designated by the United States for threatening the peace and security of Yemen under Executive Order 13611 on March 2, 2021. At the time of his designation, he was described as "the Houthi Naval Forces Chief of Staff," and he has been a well-known Houthi commander on the Red Sea coast since 2015. See "Treasury Sanctions Key Military Leaders of the Ansarallah Militia in Yemen," U.S. Department of Treasury, March 2, 2021.

ce Al-Khawlani was moved to an internal security role in Ibb during September 2019. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cf An Al-Yemen Now investigative report has a very useful image of al-Kahlani as one of Abdalmalik's bodyguards and then again as a logistics official more recently. See "Who is the Houthi terrorist called Abu Ali Al-Kahlani?" Al-Yemen Now, December 13, 2018.

cg One Al Masdar Online report suggests there have been dozens of drone and missile storage warehouses and workshops in recent years: "From that date until December 2021, the investigation team monitored nearly 50 operations that the coalition announced in Houthi-controlled areas 'to target and destroy an integrated network of Houthi drone capabilities and logistical facilities and the locations of foreign experts.' Of these, about 40 operations were in Sana'a, while the rest were distributed in Saada, Hodeidah and Mahwit governorates." See Fares al-Suraihi, "How Iran infiltrates the skies of Yemen to threaten the region and the world," Al Masdar Online English, February 4, 2022.

its growing involvement in mass mobilization.¹⁴⁴ Somewhat akin to the state adoption of militias under Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces,¹⁴⁵ the Houthis have folded a number of their militias into the MoD administrative structure in order to provide them with legitimacy, payment, and support.¹⁴⁶ Some of these so-called "Popular Committees" existed before 2014,^{ch} and others are newer militias raised to give paid fighting jobs to Houthi-aligned tribes.^{ci} Houthi sub-units are also nested within surviving Houthi-run Yemeni Army brigades, typically small cadres that stick with a Houthi commander as he is transferred between MoD postings.¹⁴⁷ Since 2014—and particularly since the 2017 break with Ali Abdallah Saleh and his generals—the Houthi-run MoD has encouraged professional officers and personnel to take extended, partially paid home leave.¹⁴⁸ The large resultant gaps in manpower have then been filled by a new General Mobilization Authority within MoD with an estimated 130,000 recruits from the poorer segments of society,¹⁴⁹ for whom even a minimal payment (around \$30 per month) is preferable to unemployment and complete poverty.¹⁵⁰

The (unnamed) Houthi Jihad Preparation Official (also known as the Official of the Central Committee for Recruitment and Mobilization) is deputized by Abdalrahim al-Humran,¹⁵¹ who runs the General Mobilization Authority, which instructs local Houthi governorate supervisors, "neighborhood affairs managers," and "neighborhood sheikhs"^{cj} to comb households for military-age males.¹⁵² Jihad Preparation operates a basic three-tier military human resources system that recommends recruits for either special forces, technical specialist roles, or general military training.¹⁵³ The entire MoD force is subjected to varying degrees of ideological indoctrination that was not common before 2014^{ck}—and indeed a narrowing band of soldiers even remember the pre-2014 military.^{cl} Thus, in the authors' assessment, the Houthis truly do now control a military that is largely of their own crafting after just a few years of uncontested dominance.¹⁵⁴

Most recently, the Jihad Preparation Official is also developing

“Somewhat akin to the state adoption of militias under Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, the Houthis have folded a number of their militias into the [Ministry of Defense] administrative structure in order to provide them with legitimacy, payment, and support.”

what appears to be a parallel mobilization reserve akin to Iran's Basij forces.¹⁵⁵ So-called Logistics and Support Brigades¹⁵⁶ are being filled out and publicly paraded,¹⁵⁷ and these appear to be reservist formations that include older or less capable recruits, often men who already have a civilian government or academic job.¹⁵⁸ These brigades are being developed by Qasim al-Humran (Abu Kawthar),¹⁵⁹ who previously oversaw the Ministry of Youth and Sports and worked under Yahya Badr al-Din, a full brother of Husayn, when Yahya was Yemen's Minister of Education.¹⁶⁰ When placed alongside each other, the various actions of the Jihad Preparation Official look, in the view of the authors, very much like similar IRGC or Lebanese Hezbollah efforts to militarize society and create the infrastructure for permanent mobilization.¹⁶¹

Operational Control of Combatant Units

As the Houthi movement progressively swallowed up many of the military forces in Yemen in 2014-2017, it began to improvise operational control and tactical control systems for employing much larger forces on an unprecedented number of frontlines.^{cm} To some extent, the Houthi movement was used to fighting on multiple geographically separated fronts at the same time from the six Sa`da wars but not at the scale, expanse, complexity, or intensity of the fighting against the Saudi-led coalition from 2015 to the time of publication.¹⁶² Nor was the movement used to holding an operational reserve or allocating specialized enabler units from one widely separated front to another as needed.^{cn} RAND's excellent early study of the Houthi military organization rightly stresses the concept of *qabyala*, or "group and individual autonomy over stringent group solidarity," meaning a highly decentralized fighting system.¹⁶³ As the six Sa`da wars blended into state capture and the intense multi-front war against the Saudi-led coalition, the authors of this paper assess that a more professional and centrally coordinated system of operational control emerged, partly due to the assimilation of Saleh-era officers as well as due to IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah advice.¹⁶⁴

ch Examples include the Hamedan Axis of Abdallah Eida al-Razzami and the al-Hadi, al-Qasim, and Imam Zayd units. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

ci Newer post-2015 units include the Wahbi Brigades in al-Bayda, al-Mahawit Brigades in al-Mahawit, the Shaheri Brigades in Ibb, the Fateh Brigades in Midi, Hajjar and Hodeida, and the Samad Brigades on the Red Sea fronts and Tai'zz. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cj The Arabic title of these neighborhood authorities is Aqil (singular). Although the position existed long before the war, it has become particularly powerful under Houthi rule, essentially the neighborhood-level equivalent of Houthi supervisors (mushrifeen). Authors' collective knowledge of the location situation in Houthi-controlled areas. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

ck One identified Houthi religious guidance commander for the armed forces is Brigadier General Abed bin Mohammed al-Thair, variously described as "the Deputy Chief of the Ideological Department of the Houthi armed forces" and "deputy head of the Spiritual Guidance Department (Ideological) of the Yemeni armed forces." Sinaee. Details also gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cl An 18-year-old fighter today was 10 years old when the Houthis seized Sana'a, and was seven years old when the Ali Abdallah Saleh government fell.

cm The Houthis moved from fighting in northern Yemen only to new offensives on the Red Sea coast, the south coast of Yemen, and Ma'rib in the east. By the authors' rough calculation using mapping tools, the Houthi frontline expanded from about 700 kilometers in early 2014 to over 1,500 kilometers by the summer of 2015. The area occupied by Houthi forces increased from around 30,000 square kilometers to 120,000 square kilometers.

cn There is no evidence of a Houthi operational reserve during the six wars: All troops were allocated to a frontline at all times. This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

On the Jihad Council, there is both an Operations Official and a Military Regions Official,¹⁶⁵ and these closely linked roles are critical to operational control and coordination of the multi-front war.¹⁶⁶ The Operations Official is nominally a Houthi commander called Brigadier General Ismail Awadh¹⁶⁷ and his deputy Ibrahim al-Mutawakkil,^{co} who are more important than the official MoD head of operations (G-3), former Saleh loyalist Major General Mohammed al-Miqdad.¹⁶⁸ On a regular basis, Ibrahim al-Mutawakkil relocates an operations room¹⁶⁹ that tracks the frontlines and movements of Houthi and enemy forces.¹⁷⁰

Alongside the Operations Official is the Military Regions Official who engages directly with the major geographic commands—the Military Region Commands (MRCs)—to track their needs and the allocation of “enablers” to each MRC, such as drones, missiles, intelligence capabilities, armor, and artillery.¹⁷¹ At the time of publication, the preponderance of evidence suggests that the current Military Regions Commander is the dual-hatted MoD chief of staff, Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghammari, supported by a well-hidden assistant known only as “Sajjad.”¹⁷² The primary focus of this operations staff in the last two years has been coordinating the multi-axis campaign by MRCs 3, 4, and 6 (and the Central Region) to take Ma’rib city and its adjacent energy sites, with the close supervision (and sometimes over-involvement^{cp}) of Abdalkhaliq al-Huthi, Yusif al-Madani, and Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghammari.¹⁷³

The MRCs are a system created by the U.N.-backed government after the fall of the Saleh government in 2012, a slight adjustment of the Saleh-era Military Districts.^{174-cq} By the end of 2016, the Houthis had attained complete control of all the MRC headquarters and retained their basic structure as an organizing principle for the military.^{cr} At the time of publication, the Houthi MRCs are led by

the following officers:

- Third MRC (Ma’rib) is led by Major General Hadi Zuraib (Abu Issam)^{cs} and his influential aide, Brigadier General Naji Rabid.¹⁷⁵ This MRC appears to be a very small command that operates under the overarching authority of the Central Region headquarters (see below) headed by Abdalkhaliq al-Huthi.¹⁷⁶ The MRC often uses attached reinforcements when it is called upon to attack Ma’rib and its standing forces are reputedly smaller than other MRCs due to the small amount of terrain currently held by the Houthis in Ma’rib.¹⁷⁷
- The “Middle Region,” Saleh-era nomenclature that is used by the Houthis to cover the post-2012 Fourth and Seventh MRCs (the south, headquartered in Dhammar), covers the southern arc of governorates of Al-Bayda, Ibb, Ta’izz, Dhammar, Al-Dhale, Lahj, Shabwa, and Abyan.¹⁷⁸ The overarching Middle Region comes under the control of Fourth MRC commander Major General Abdallatif Hamud al-Mahdi (Abu Nasser).^{ct} Under al-Mahdi is the Seventh MRC (a sub-command covering Dhammar, Ibb, and Al-Bayda) commanded by Major General Nasser al-Mohammadi (Abu Murtadha al-Munabbahi).^{cu} The southern front is largely a political and tribal engagement front,^{cv} with active military operations in Ta’izz and Al-Bayda, at the western and eastern ends of the command’s frontage.¹⁷⁹
- Fifth MRC (the west, headquartered in Hodeida) covers Hodeida, Hajjar, Al Mahawit, and Raymah governorates, and was (until recently) actively led by veteran combat

co Al-Mutawakkil is a very prominent Zaydi and *sadah* family, which was a dominant force in the imamate. See Brandt, pp. 21-29, 40-44. Today, Taha al-Mutawakkil is the Houthi health minister. Al-Gabarni, “Who are the Houthis?” Adel al-Mutawakkil heads the University of Science and Technology. “Houthi official says over \$13bn of Yemen’s oil wealth ‘looted’ over 5 years,” Middle East Monitor, August 24, 2022. Issam al-Mutawakkil is the spokesman for the Yemeni Petroleum Company, the state-run national oil company. Romy Haber, “The Houthis and the Hijacking of Yemen’s Education Sector,” Euro-Gulf Information Centre, February 9, 2021.

cp In the authors’ collective view, Ma’rib became an overwhelming obsession for the Houthi military leadership. Third MRC assaulted from the west in Sirwah, Sixth MRC sought to envelop Ma’rib from the north, and Fourth MRC attempted an envelopment from the south. The offensive finally collapsed in January 2022 following a strong counterattack against the southern flank of the offensive. As in any operation, ‘too many cooks spoil the broth’—meaning that too many intervening senior commanders and too many command changes can negatively affect operations. For a good overview of the campaign, see Alex Almeida and Michael Knights, “Breaking Point: Consolidating Houthi Military Setbacks in Yemen,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 19, 2022.

cq Note that the 1st and 2nd MRCs in Hadramawt and the 4th MRC in Aden still exist, but these areas are clear of Houthi forces and the Houthis have not created headquarters for these locations. This is the authors’ collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

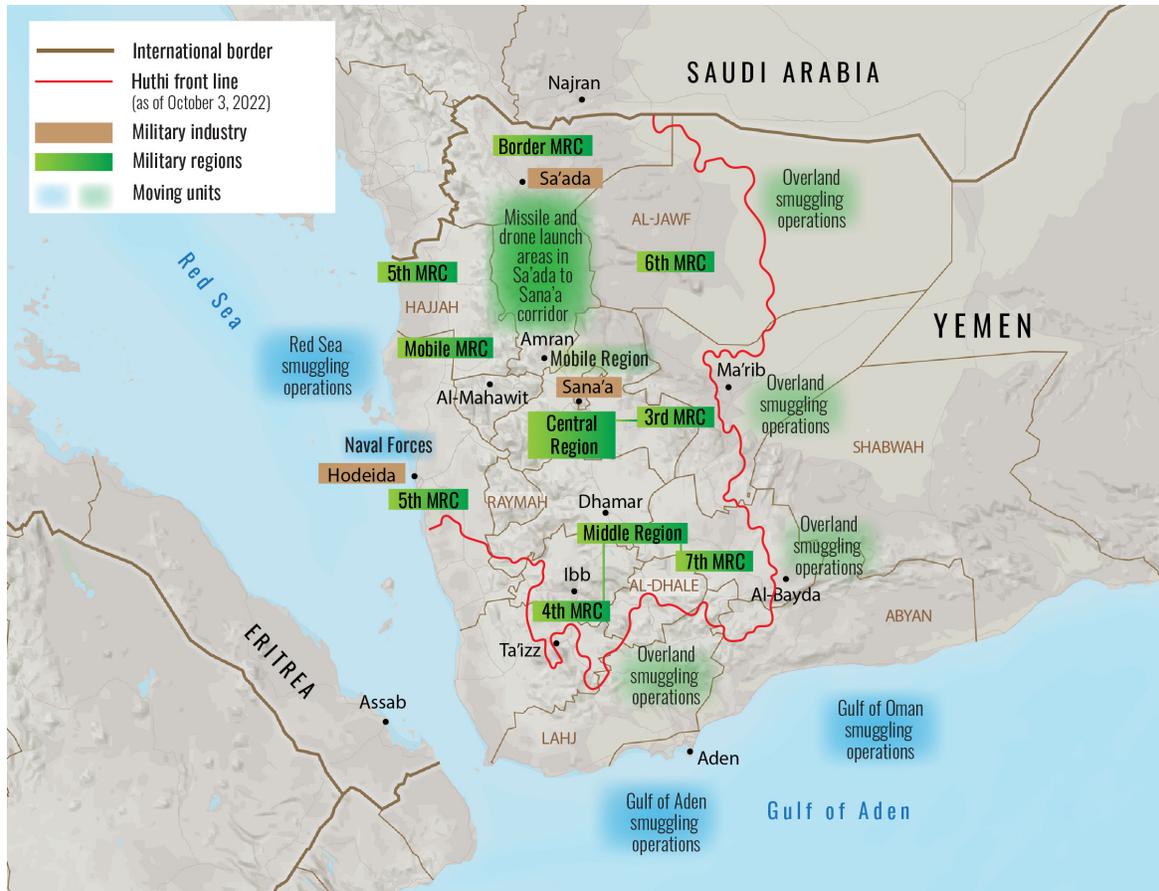
cr The gradual purging of Saleh commanders from the MRCs and the Presidential Guard Brigades in 2016-2017 was the proximate cause of the Saleh-Houthi showdown in December 2017. This is the collective assessment of the author team, reflecting the strong consensus on this issue from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

cs Zuraib is a veteran fighter from the six Sa’ada wars who was obscure in post-2011 Houthi affairs until called upon to command the Third MRC, which is a kind of “sub-command” of the Central Region (as the Houthis have thus far failed to conquer Third MRC areas in Ma’rib and Shabwa). Al-Gabarni, “Who are the Houthis?”

ct Abu Nasser gained notoriety for his very active insurgent operations in southern Sa’ada during the six wars, mainly on the northernmost frontlines adjacent to Saudi Arabia. He has a connection to Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghammari. Abu Nasser’s effective stewardship of the whole southern front—a quiet but very long frontline—suggests he is an especially important commander. Abu Nasser has big shoes to fill as Abdallah al-Hakim (Abu Ali) previously held the southern fronts. Abu Nasser focuses mainly on Ta’izz and Ma’rib-focused operations (in Al-Bayda). Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

cu Al-Mohammadi appears by his tribal name to be from the extreme west of Sa’ada governorate, in one of the areas that fell to Houthi control at the very end of the six wars. He does not appear to be one of the more successful Houthi commanders and is closely supervised by Abu Nasser. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

cv In an example of this, the Houthis have raised new tribal auxiliary forces to give work and patronage to local tribes, with new brigades appearing with names such as Nasser and Quds (Dhammar and Ta’izz), Wahbi (Al-Bayda) and Shaheri (Ibb). In the case of the four Nasser brigades (numbered 1, 2, 3, 4), these entirely Houthi-built and fully indoctrinated units eventually gained the honorific descriptor “nukhba” (elites) due to their credible battlefield performance on the Red Sea coast frontlines. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.



Houthi Military Regional Commands and geographic zones of military activity
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leader Major General Yusif al-Madani (Abu Husayn^{cw}). The command now appears to be led in an acting or transitional capacity by Madani's former MRC deputy commander Hamza Abu Talib, a low-profile fighter who seems to have been groomed to hold the role.¹⁸⁰ Like the southern front, the Red Sea coast is now mainly a tribal engagement and holding action by local auxiliary units raised by the Houthis to spread patronage among the tribes and coastal communities.^{cx}

- Sixth MRC (the northeast) covers Al-Jawf, Amran, and Sa`da, and is led by Major General Jamil Yahya Mohammed

Zaraa (Abu Badr).^{cy}

- Border Region covers northern Sa`da, and is led by Ahmed Yahya Jassar, a Houthi official who formerly worked in the Jihad Office.¹⁸¹ Facing Saudi Arabia, the border region seems to have a special sub-regional command and to employ a number of long-established^{cz} and new tribal auxiliary units.^{da}

cy Zaraa is quite an obscure commander, even by Houthi standards, and has no known significant combat pedigree from the six wars. He is considered a mentee of senior Houthi leader Saleh al-Sammad, one of Abdalmalik's close circle, who was killed by a Saudi drone strike on April 19, 2018. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also "Yemen war: Houthi political leader Saleh al-Sammad 'killed in air raid,'" BBC, April 23, 2018.

cz One of these is Abdullah Eida al-Razzami's Abdallah Hamedan axis (Kitaf and Buqa) which is now led by his son Yahya. Other old "Ansar Allah Brigades" from the Sa`ada area include Al-Hadi, Qasim and Imam Zayd. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

da For instance, the Jizan brigades are one of the newer "Ansar Allah Brigades" that focus on the northwestern border of Sa`ada governorate. They are led by Major General Ahmed Yahya Jassar, one of the Houthi leaders who worked in the secretariat of the Jihad Office. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

cw Abu Husayn is identified as al-Madani's *kunya* by the United Nations here. "Yusuf al-Madani," United Nations Security Council, November 9, 2021.

cx The Houthis have raised new tribal auxiliary forces—"Ansar Allah Brigades"—in the Fifth MRC to give work and patronage to local tribes, with new brigades appearing with names such as Sammad (*Hodeida*), Al-Mahawit (*Al-Mahawit*), and Fateh (*Hajjah*). Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

Praetorian Units in the Sana'a Area

There are two geographic commands in the vital Sana'a area. One is the so-called Central Region, which is again recycled Saleh-era nomenclature for the capital Sana'a and Sana'a governorate (plus parts of western Ma'rib), and is commanded by Abdalkhaliq al-Huthi (Abu Yunis),^{db} the full brother of Abdalmalik.^{dc} In the authors' collective view, Abdalkhaliq exercises tactical control¹⁸² over all military forces in Sana'a, most importantly the Reserve Forces (four Presidential Protection Brigades and the Missile Brigades Group).¹⁸³ Abdalkhaliq is not necessarily a skilled commander,^{dd} but he leans on a number of capable subordinates, including the Central Region deputy commander Mohammed Abdallah (Abu Mahdi), who has held day-to-day command authority for Central Region forces since the removal of Saleh loyalists in December 2017.^{de}

The Presidential Protection Brigades were the post-2012 renaming of the Saleh-era Republican Guards, who continued to serve under Saleh and his nephew Tareq Saleh until the Houthi-Saleh showdown in December 2017.¹⁸⁴ In the months leading up to and immediately after Saleh's death, the Presidential Protection Brigades were purged of Saleh loyalists and bolstered with Houthi recruits.¹⁸⁵ The Presidential Protection Brigades are led by Houthi fighter Abdallah Yahya al-Hasani (Abu Mohammed al-Razehi), a veteran of the six wars who is similar in age to Abdullah al-Hakim (Abu Ali).¹⁸⁶ The backgrounds of the four unit commanders of the Presidential Protection Brigades largely remain obscure, but at least one of the four commanders is a Houthi and has been in

place as far back as 2014.^{df} After seven years of re-staffing and indoctrination under overall Houthi control, the authors assess that the Presidential Protection Brigades today likely represent a fusion of Saleh-era elite materiel,^{de} select Republican Guard officers, Houthi supervisors and fighters, and Houthi-recruited troops who can only dimly remember a pre-Houthi era.¹⁸⁷

A final elite reserve that appears to be cantoned in the northern Sana'a area¹⁸⁸ is the so-called Mobile Region (also variously known as the Mobile Zone, the Mobile Forces, and the Central Intervention Forces).¹⁸⁹ This is led by a Houthi commander called Abdalmalik al-Mortada (Abu Talib al-Sufyan), a veteran combat commander from the six wars.^{dh} The Mobile Forces—a reputedly large strike force^{di}—is centrally located and appears (in the authors' assessment) to be postured to intervene against local uprisings, almost in the manner of a national (paramilitary) police force.¹⁹⁰

Other elite forces are under the supervision of the aforementioned Special Forces Official (SFO) who is only known by the *kunya* Abu Fatima.^{dj} The Special Forces Official's area of responsibility seems to be the Houthi units that directly draw upon Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah support,¹⁹¹ and the SFO role is closely associated with the IRGC-QF Jihad Assistant and his Hezbollah deputy and seems to work directly to the Jihad Council.¹⁹² The Special Forces Official manages a network of safe houses, stores, and workshops in the Sana'a and Sa`da areas at which imported weapons are made ready or where smuggled components are integrated with in-country materials.¹⁹³ There are indications that Abdallah al-Hakim (Abu Ali) and his Military Intelligence Authority have special responsibilities

db As noted above, Abdalkhaliq also exercises control over operations on his eastern flank, via the Third MRC in Ma'rib, which is under his influence. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

dc Abdalkhaliq was designated by the United Nations and the United States in November 2014. See "Abd Al-Khaliq Al-Houthi," United Nations Security Council, November 7, 2014, and "Yemen-related designations." In January 2021, Abdalkhaliq was listed as a specially designated global terrorist. See "Designation of Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim as Specially Designated Global Terrorists," Federal Register, January 19, 2021. Less than a month later, the SDGT designation was revoked. See "Revocation of the Designations of Ansarallah, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim (and Their Respective Aliases) as Specially Designated Global Terrorists," Federal Register, February 16, 2021. Despite the SDGT revocation, Abdulkhaliq remained "sanctioned under E.O. 13611 related to acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen." See "Revocation of the Terrorist Designations of Ansarallah."

dd Abdalkhaliq has often been involved in the more ambitious and high-profile Houthi offensive operations, including the successful but later reversed Aden offensive in 2015, the successful Nihm offensive in 2019, and the near-success at Ma'rib in 2020. It is unclear, however, whether he simply shows up at major offensives to gain credit or whether his input has real bearing on these campaigns. Authors' own collective analysis of the relative success and failure of Houthi offensives in the Yemen war, 2015-2020.

de Until December 2017, a Saleh loyalist Mehdi Miqulah led the Reserve Forces, and was preceded by Major General Ali bin al-Jaifi, who died in a Saudi airstrike in October 2016. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

df Three of the Presidential Protection Brigades (PPB) commanders are largely anonymous: Colonel Mohammed al-Shuaibi (1st PPB); Colonel Mohammed al-Jabiri (2nd PPB); and Colonel Abdallah Abbas (4th PPB). The 3rd PPB commander, Fouad al-Imad, has been in position since November 2014 and is a Houthi. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

dg For instance, the authors have watched video of Presidential Protection Brigade parades that include T-80 and T-72 tanks. Recently, an August 12, 2022, parade in Sana'a showed T-80BV tanks with Explosive Reactive Armor in the service of the Presidential Protection Brigades. These tanks were drawn from the 3rd Republican Guard brigade stocks. YouTube video URL available upon request. For a gazetteer of ground combat systems inherited by the Houthis in 2014, see "Handbook Of Pre-War Yemeni Fighting Vehicles," Oryx website, September 20, 2015.

dh Abu Talib is quite enigmatic at this point but reputedly led Houthi forces of around 200 fighters in the six wars and ended that period as the field commander in the important Harf al-Sufyan area. He is a low-profile operator who has, in the words of one investigator, "grown in the shadows." Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

di The Mobile Region is described as numbering 15,000-20,000 forces, which may be inaccurate and seems too large for a newly raised force. More likely, either the force is much smaller or it is a command staff that can call upon allocated units from the MRCs and the Central Region when offensive or counter-offensive operations require the deployment of a concentrated force. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

dj Abu Fatima appears to be from Hajjah and is a member of a *sadah* family. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

for the movement and security of Iranian and Lebanese advisors.^{dk} One IRGC-QF unit associated with the Houthi qualitative forces is Unit 340,¹⁹⁴ whose remit is to enable the transfer of military capabilities to partner forces.^{dl}

The two main classes of elite forces that have been identified are “qualitative forces” and “special forces.”¹⁹⁵ The so-called “qualitative forces” are split into two main sections:

- Aerospace forces (drone and missile) are led by Yemen Air Force and Air Defense commander Major General Ahmed Ali Ahsan al-Hamzi, a Houthi from a *sadah* family who received military training in Iran according to the U.S. Treasury.¹⁹⁶ Al-Hamzi is supported by a fast-rising young Houthi known as Zakaria Abdullah Yahya Hajjar,¹⁹⁷ another Iranian-trained drone and missile specialist who is drawn from a *sadah* family from the Bani al-Harith area of Sana’a.^{dm} The Houthi chief of staff Major General Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghamhari and Minister of Defense Staff Major General Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi, the former head of the Missiles Brigade Group, work alongside the Special Forces Official to support the aerospace units.¹⁹⁸
- Naval forces (mines, missiles and boats) are led by the Naval Forces chief of staff Mansour al-Saadi, a long-standing Houthi commander on the Red Sea coast since 2015.¹⁹⁹ According to the U.S. Treasury, al-Saadi “masterminded lethal attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea” and received military training in Iran.²⁰⁰

Perhaps surprisingly, the grouping and organization of light-infantry-type ground “special forces” in the Houthi order of battle is more of a mystery. Since at least the sixth Sa`da war, there has been a noted similarity between Houthi commando operations and Hezbollah border-raiding tactics against Israel.²⁰¹ As noted in the September 2018 *CTC Sentinel* article by one of the authors (Knights), “Houthi forces have achieved great tactical success

against Saudi border posts through offensive mine-laying^{dn} on supply routes and ATGM [anti-tank guided missile] strikes on armored vehicles and outposts.²⁰² Yet, it is less clear how elite light infantry forces are organized and grouped. Certain Houthi ground forces units have been framed as elite light infantry^{do} and land special forces commanders appear to have been identified in the past after being killed.^{203 dp} Though most accounts of specifically named Houthi “special forces units” appear apocryphal,^{dq} there does seem to be a training program to enhance the capabilities of land forces commanders, staff officers, and tactical operators in light infantry fighting and to reinforce ideological fervor.²⁰⁴ One example of units that appear to have received such strengthening are the Nasser brigades on the Red Sea coast, which attained a kind of honorific status (*nukhba*, meaning elites) after receiving such training. The aforementioned Mobile Region could be another example of an effort to develop elite light infantry strike forces.²⁰⁵

Analytic Conclusions

The Houthi movement is an evolving subject, and the trendline, in the authors’ view, is toward a centralization of command and control, and greater coercive power in the hands of the top leadership.²⁰⁶ When RAND undertook its pioneering study of the Houthis in 2010,²⁰⁷ based on evidence available then, it was absolutely right to describe the Houthi movement as a “heterogeneous” organism that appeared decentralized and non-cohesive, with its leaders cloistered in rural redoubts and unable or unwilling to take authoritarian control of the movement.²⁰⁸ The RAND authors Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells presciently anticipated that the movement might move beyond a fighting style of “unconnected fighting groups” to form “a coordinated, synchronized fighting force.”²⁰⁹ Likewise, anthropologist Marieke Brandt correctly portrayed the traditional role of the *sadah* as dependent on tribal protection, turning their weakness (versus tribal groups) into a strength by playing the historic role of mediator and arbiter of tribal law and social peace.²¹⁰

The situation described above has arguably changed. Abdalmalik al-Huthi and his inner circle of *sadah* followers are now anything but weak mediators, bolstered now by over a decade

dk This would make sense as Abdallah al-Hakim (Abu Ali) is probably the most respected Houthi military commander and is senior enough to operate across MRC boundaries with overarching authority. In other environments, intelligence and security agencies are used to move and hide Iranian and Hezbollah advisors. In Iraq, for instance, this role is carried out by the Amn al-Hashd, or the Popular Mobilization Forces Security Directorate. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

dl Unit 340 is the IRGC-QF Technical Department. According to Israel’s Intelligence Research Division (IRD), Unit 340 enables Iran’s partner forces to develop and field military technology and military industries; the IRD unit commander Aman Saar noted: “I like to give the example of Unit 340 of Quds Force, which does design at cost to weapons ... They understand that you cannot build a missile with Iranian technology and then expect the Yemenis to accept and operate it, so they are suitable for the Yemenis with a relevant plant.” Veteran Israeli defense journalist Amos Harel describes Unit 340 as “responsible for the research and development that serves all the terrorist and guerilla organizations operating with Tehran’s patronage and financing ... The knowhow gained by the Iranians is quickly and effectively relayed to their proxies throughout the region.” See Jennifer Bell, “Iran making ‘significant developments’ in building its weapon arsenal: Israeli media,” *Al-Arabiya English*, March 18, 2021.

dm Zakaria Hajjar is reported by interviewees to work alongside a third Houthi missile and drone commander called Ahmed Mohammed Ali al-Jowhari, about whom nothing is currently known. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

dn These include Explosively-Formed Penetrator, large 120mm-diameter shaped charges, directional charges and claymore warheads, (repurposed naval mines, plus anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. Author (Knights) interview, Gulf coalition explosives ordnance technicians; names of interviewee, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

do In 2020, one unit on the Ma’rib front was described in one press report as “an elite brigade trained by militants from the Lebanese group Hezbollah.” “Senior rebel commander killed in Yemen amid fierce battles,” *Arab News*, May 8, 2020.

dp The head of Houthi land special forces, Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Hamdan, was reported killed in May 2020 on the Ma’rib front. *Ibid*.

dq One of the authors (Knights) has previously described such units as the Katibat al-Mawt (Death Battalions), Katibat al-Ashura (Ashura Battalions), but these appear to be normal Houthi units attributed elite-sounding names in specific operations—in essence, a psychological operation. Knights, “The Houthi War Machine.” The same author just completed writing on a book about the battle of Aden in 2015, in which Katibat al-Ashura Battalions is also mentioned by interviewees as a unit that was present during major offensive operations by the Houthis. Whether this is an actual fixed-name unit or whether the moniker is applied to any major Houthi offensive force remains unknown.

“Iran sees the Houthis as a remarkable asset, on par with Lebanese Hezbollah, albeit at an earlier stage of development. In the authors’ assessment, based on investigative work in both Iraq and Yemen, the Houthis are respected by IRGC-QF to a greater extent than Iraqi militias because the Houthis have proven themselves to be more capable, cohesive, and disciplined.”

of internal security advice and procedures provided by Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah.²¹¹ Whereas RAND rightfully doubted (based on data available in 2010) that the Houthi leaders could rule by “authoritarian control of physical coercion,”²¹² the coercive machine that is available today is far more capable of suppressing dissent.²¹³ As Adel Dashela noted in a 2022 study on tribal dynamics in Houthi-controlled northern Yemen,²¹⁴ the Houthi movement now employs “a totalitarian mindset, applying a logic of oppression and dominance towards the northern tribes” that has allowed the temporary subjugation of tribal power.²¹⁵ Even skeptics of Iranian involvement such as Marieke Transfield draw attention to strong “parallels in the Hizballah takeover of West Beirut in 2008 and the Houthi grab of power in 2014 [that] also suggest some exchange on military strategy.”²¹⁶

Likewise, previous scholarship was absolutely right to point to a lack of strong public evidence of Iranian mentorship in the Houthi movement,²¹⁷ but this has been rendered moot by subsequent events and outpaced by the gradual release of materials on the growing role of the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah during the years in which the Houthi movement became extraordinarily successful on the battlefield, namely from the fourth Sa’da war in 2007 to

dr RAND noted: “Much like the tribal shaykh who relies on soft power to maintain influence over individuals and cannot sustain authoritarian control, both the central commanders and [local area leaders] within the Houthi organism must rely on local prestige to mobilize their subordinates. Thus, instead of leading through intimidation, the Houthi commander—whether Husayn or ‘Abd al-Malik—must cultivate loyalty and obedience through influence and persuasion. Such methods are congruent with long enduring local norms according to which authority and prestige do not emanate from authoritarian control or physical coercion.” Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 224.

ds Dashela notes: “The Houthi movement used an array of policies toward the tribes, including violence, and altered tribal customs and traditions to serve its war project, and this led to depletion of the tribes’ human resources. The Houthi movement is an ideologically driven military group with a totalitarian mindset, applying a logic of oppression and dominance toward the northern tribes. In other words, it lacks a base of popular support in tribal communities, which have been largely coerced into expressions of solidarity, including participation in the Houthi war effort. While tribes enjoyed social and political privilege during the Saleh regime, they have been stripped of this during the Houthi era, and they are no longer the cohesive tribal entity they once were.” Dashela, p. 13.

the present day.²¹⁸ Badr al-Din, Husayn, and Abdalmalik, as well as many other Houthi commanders, drew heavily on the examples and the political and military models of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. In the formation of the Jihad Council, the Houthis deliberately adopted Hezbollah’s organization model, and in the acceptance of an IRGC-QF Jihad Assistant at the heart of Houthi military strategy, the Houthis adopted the same mentoring model as Iraqi terrorist group Kata’ib Hezbollah. The Houthi military has adopted many features of IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah counterparts, including top-level command and control architecture, preventative security arrangements, information operations, training, covert procurement, military industrialization, drone and missile forces, and guerrilla naval operations, to name a few.²¹⁹ Indeed, the process is not yet finished: The Houthi-controlled military is still in chrysalis form—part way through its metamorphosis into what the authors assess to be a very close clone of the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah military and security systems, with the birth of a Basij-type mobilization and internal security system already coming into view.^{dt}

Is it possible that IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah provided this transformative support but sought no influence over the Houthi decision-making system? Based on the authors’ collective investigation, Iranian leaders do utilize a very soft touch, but this is precisely because their alignment of ideology and goals is already so close to Abdalmalik and his inner circle.²²⁰ As noted earlier in this piece, conflict and terrorism analysts may find it profitable to look harder and further back for the beginnings of IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah interactions with the Houthi leaders. It may also be worth re-examining the drivers of the Houthi-IRGC and Houthi-Hezbollah relationships. Were these mainly relationships of necessity, driven to unintended levels by the wars in Yemen, or were they highly intentional relationships of choice from the outset, based on a common worldview?

Whenever and however the Houthi relationships started with IRGC-QF and Hezbollah, these relationships now appear to be exceedingly strong and stable.²²¹ In the assessment of the authors, Iran sees the Houthis as a remarkable asset, on par with Lebanese Hezbollah, albeit at an earlier stage of development.^{du} In the authors’ assessment, based on investigative work in both Iraq and Yemen, the Houthis are respected by IRGC-QF to a greater extent than Iraqi militias because the Houthis have proven themselves to be more capable, cohesive, and disciplined.²²² The Jihad Assistant oversees a relationship with the Houthis that is reputedly warm, discreet, respectful, and highly valued by both sides.²²³ According to the authors’ collective research, Lebanese Hezbollah’s relations with the group appear similarly respectful, egalitarian, and brotherly, which (again) is often not the case between Lebanese

dt Indeed, the authors have found in their interviews that key Houthi commanders like Abdallah al-Hakim (Abu Ali) and Yusuf al-Madani are being focused on internal security missions and the development of local reserve forces. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

du The relationship has long legs also: Houthi leaders are comparatively young, often still in their thirties, forties, and fifties. They might be good partners for Tehran for decades to come. This is the authors’ collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

and Iraqi groups.²²⁴ dv Neither Iran nor Hezbollah appear to play in the internal politics of the Houthis to a measurable extent, in part because the movement—unlike Iraqi militias—has a unity and discipline that both Iran and Hezbollah appreciate in a partner.²²⁵

Iranian and Lebanese interaction with the Houthi leadership is so narrowly focused on Abdalmalik and the Jihad Council that it is, in the authors' collective assessment, probably invisible to most Houthis and to Yemenis and the world at large.²²⁶ Though it is not possible to identify any Houthi command decisions in which IRGC-QF or Hezbollah forced the Houthis to decide differently than they might independently have, it is assessed as probable that Iran has built up sufficient goodwill and credit with the Houthi leadership that it can selectively call on the Houthis to serve Iranian interests in ways that may incur new costs or difficulties for the Houthis.²²⁷ If Abdalmalik and his inner circle decide to cede certain strategic decisions to Iran, almost no one would know it had happened and no one would be in a position to protest within the centralized totalitarian structure of today's Houthi movement.

Therefore, even if the Houthi relationship with Iran and Hezbollah is not that of a proxy, this article argues that the connection is arguably that of a strong, deep-rooted alliance that is underpinned by tight ideological affinity and geopolitical

alignment.²²⁸ This suggests that the relationship will only grow closer, regardless of whether fighting in Yemen waxes or wanes, and that the Houthis may play an integrated role in future Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah military campaigns.^{dw} If a key Houthi supporter of close relations with Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah, such as Abdalmalik, were to die or be otherwise replaced, there is now a broad-based set of leaders whose whole ideological and political upbringing will predispose them to continue this beneficial and warm relationship.²²⁹ In the authors' view, the risk that a 'southern Hezbollah' might emerge is arguably now a fact on the ground. **CTC**

dv Again, Knights (and co-authors) detected tensions between Iraqi militias and Lebanese Hezbollah that does not seem to exist between the Houthis and Hezbollah. This reflects the balance of evidence from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik, "Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry," *CTC Sentinel* 14:8 (2021).

dw In essence, this process has begun already. To give two examples, the Houthis claimed both the May 2019 drone attack on Saudi Arabia's East-West oil pipeline and the September 2019 cruise missile and drone attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil processing facilities, even though both attacks were shown to have originated in Iraq (May 2019) and Iran and Iraq (September 2019). See Michael Knights and Tim Michetti, "How to Present Evidence of Iranian Involvement in the Saudi Attack," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 26, 2019. For evidence of Iraqi militia fundraising efforts for Houthi operations, see Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, "Kataib Hezbollah Behind 'Grassroots' Iraqi Fundraising for Yemen," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 1, 2022. The Kataib Hezbollah spokesman noted "the honorable sons of Iraq had to ... support their Yemeni brothers. Therefore, we will launch a big campaign under the slogan *ammalokum mosayarat* [your money will turn to drones] ... to gather money for the Yemeni people to buy drones." Worthy of a separate lengthy article, ties between the Houthis and the Iraqi Shi'a militias are growing quickly. This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts. See also Katherine Zimmerman, "Yemen's Houthis and the expansion of Iran's Axis of Resistance," American Enterprise Institute, March 2022.

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- 15 Brandt, p. 144.
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- 17 Oved Lobel, "Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen," Report No. 20, European Eye on Radicalization, March 2021, pp. 10-11. Also drawn from details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- 18 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 106.
- 19 Drawn from an interview for this study. Names of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
- 20 Lobel, pp. 10-11. Also drawn from details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
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- 22 Lobel, pp. 10-11. See also Brandt, pp. 132-134.
- 23 Brandt, p. 126.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 101-103 on *hadawism*. See also Michael Knights, "The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture," *CTC Sentinel* 11:8 (2018).
- 26 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 102-105.

- 27 Ibid., pp. 5-6, 99. See also Brandt, pp. 116-118.
- 28 Brandt, p. 146.
- 29 For a full-throated and documented making of the case for long-term Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah involvement, see Lobel.
- 30 For an account of the six wars, see "Part III: The Six Sa'da Wars" in Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 129-242. See also "Part Two: The Sa'dah Wars (2004-2010)" in Brandt, pp. 153-336.
- 31 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 254.
- 32 This is an almost uniform view gathered from interviews for this study and fits with the authors' collective assessment. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also Adnan al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis? The hidden structures and key leaders who actually run the organization," Al Masdar Online English, March 14, 2022.
- 33 Brandt, pp., 122-123.
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- 38 For good genealogical mapping of Badr al-Din's close relatives, see Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 106.
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