

Houthi Messaging May Hint at a Targeting Pattern

by [Elana DeLozier \(/experts/elana-delozier\)](#)

Jun 13, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/rsayl-alhwthyyn-qd-tshyr-aly-aslwb-asthdaf-myn\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Elana DeLozier \(/experts/elana-delozier\)](#)

Elana DeLozier was the Rubin Family Fellow in the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy from 2018-2022, where she specialized in Yemen, the Gulf states, and nuclear weapons and proliferation.



Brief Analysis

The Yemeni group appears to select targets directly inspired by its principal complaints, potentially helping security officials protect against future attacks while negotiators promote overall de-escalation.

On June 12, the Houthis launched a missile that struck Abha airport in the southern Saudi Arabian province of Asir, reportedly injuring twenty-six people and providing the latest example in their emerging eye-for-an-eye targeting pattern. A review of Houthi messaging supports the suggestion of such a pattern. According to their messaging, Houthi missile attacks targeting Riyadh in 2017–18 were carried out in retribution for Saudi-led coalition airstrikes on Sana; the strikes on a Saudi oil pipeline in mid-May were in response to perceived economic strangulation; and this most recent action against an airport was a counterpunch for the closure of Sana airport.

The Houthis repeatedly frame their attacks as self-defensive in nature and claim a measure-for-measure approach. Highlighting the latter, Mohammed Abdulsalam, the lead Houthi negotiator and a group spokesman, recently cited the Quran, saying, “Whoever has assaulted you, assault him in the same way that he has assaulted you.” Moreover, the group often appears to preview its attacks by tweeting about a certain grievance days before targeting a symbol of that grievance. For security officials, an understanding of these patterns can be useful in anticipating targets and enacting measures to prevent the success of future attacks.

Messaging on Three Attacks

On June 9, in an apparent preview three days before the Abha strike, Abdulsalam claimed that attacks on Saudi airports were justified because of the continued closure of Sana airport. “Targeting their airports or at least paralyzing them is the only way to force them into lifting the siege on Sana airport,” he said. He also referenced an injured Houthi activist who was denied access to care because of the airport closure. Shortly after the attack,

Abdulsalam invoked the Sana airport situation—as well as the failure of the United Nations to broker a political solution—as the motive.

A month earlier, on May 14, the Houthis targeted two pumping stations along the Saudi East-West Pipeline to the Red Sea, justifying this strike on economic infrastructure as payback for the Saudi-led coalition's economic blockade on Yemen. Houthi spokesman Abdulsalam tweeted, "The demands of the Yemeni people are simple: you must lift the economic blockade and end the aerial blockade." In the days prior—again in an apparent preview—Houthi rhetoric on Twitter focused heavily on economic issues, with specific complaints centering on the nonpayment of salaries and the blockade. Targeting a fuel pipeline may also have symbolized the Houthis' objection to Decree 75, issued last year by Yemen's government, which disqualified many in Houthi-controlled areas from importing fuel.

Finally, between November 2017 and June 2018, the Houthis repeatedly targeted Riyadh with Iranian-made Qiam short-range ballistic missiles. The Houthis have also targeted the UAE's main cities, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, with drones. Their narrative again emphasized the eye-for-an-eye approach. On the Houthi TV channel Al Masirah, Houthi spokesman Col. Aziz Rashed justified a May 2018 missile attack on Riyadh as revenge for Saudi airstrikes on the Yemeni capital. Similarly, Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree threatened to hit the UAE in response to "escalation in Hodeida," a critical province on Yemen's Red Sea coast where UAE forces were then active.

The Iran Connection

Even though the Houthis have crafted narratives rooted in specific grievances, many outside observers instead interpret the recent Houthi attacks as part of a series of Iran-driven disruptions in the Arabian Peninsula. The Abha attack occurred just a day before two ships were attacked in the Gulf of Oman; similarly, the pipeline attack happened one day after four ships in the Gulf of Oman were struck in an operation widely attributed to Iran. Seeking to uphold their credibility, the Houthis adamantly denied an Iranian role in the pipeline job, with Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, the head of their Supreme Revolutionary Committee, making a rare appearance on BBC Arabic to make this case. But consensus opinion about an Iranian hand drowned out these protestations. Even if Yemen-based grievances had really inspired the attacks, then the Houthis showed extreme clumsiness in carrying them out on the days they did.

An Opening for Negotiators

For security and intelligence officials, the Houthis' penchant for previewing targets and logic in choosing them could provide useful insights for protecting these targets. This is true even if publicly stated Houthi motives sometimes differ from deeper ones, as suspected in the pipeline and airport strikes. For example, in a potential preview, Houthi spokesman Yahya Saree hinted at future activity immediately after the Abha attack, suggesting Yemenis should avoid airports and military sites in the region.

The Houthis' rhetorical patterns may also present opportunities for negotiators by illuminating their core demands, such as lifting the economic blockade, paying salaries, and opening the Sana airport. Moreover, the Houthi self-defense argument suggests they may limit or cease external attacks if a de-escalation is negotiated in Yemen. Such quid pro quo targeting, however, also lends itself to a ransom-style mindset, and as already noted, the Houthis have on occasion implied that UN failures are part of the reason for their attacks. Negotiators should ignore these inferences and not allow themselves to be held hostage to Houthi demands or threats.

Both the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis have long called for a political solution to the Yemen crisis, but both have also escalated militarily when talks break down. Since mid-May, some have raised questions about whether Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy for Yemen, can regain trust locally after the Hadi government raised serious concerns about his implementation of the Stockholm agreement, signed between the government and the Houthis in December 2018. Relatedly, the Yemeni foreign minister, Khaled al-Yamani, resigned in June, with some reports

suggesting his views diverged from President Hadi's on how the government should pursue peace.

To be sure, de-escalation in both Yemen and the broader region demands a renewed focus on the political process. Recently reaffirmed U.S., Saudi, and UAE support for Griffiths, the UN envoy, is a start. The United States must now lean on its regional allies to influence the Hadi government and the Houthis to recommit to such a political process.

Elana DeLozier is a research fellow in The Washington Institute's Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy, where she specializes in nuclear weapons and proliferation, counterterrorism, and Gulf politics. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



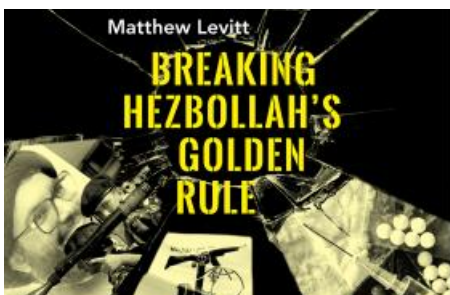
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)