

# Yemen War Heats Up Iran's Anti-Saudi Rhetoric

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Brief Analysis

**The Islamic Republic views the Yemen conflict as another battlefield in its proxy struggle with Saudi Arabia, spurring Iranian government, media, and religious figures to open a war of words in recent weeks.**

**O**n May 14, following a meeting with Iraqi president Fuad Masum, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei warned that "Saudis have made a major mistake in Yemen, and they will certainly get hurt by it." He also emphasized that the "massacre" there should be stopped as soon as possible, and that "an unwise and ignorant mindset among the Saudis is making decisions about Yemen."

As the latest arena in which Iran has sought to challenge the United States and its Arab allies, the Yemen conflict has intensified anti-Saudi discourse from Iranian officials and state-controlled media to a level not seen since 1987, when a Saudi crackdown on Iranian demonstrators in Mecca resulted in hundreds of deaths and a temporary cessation of diplomatic ties. Today, the Islamic Republic is once again waging a propaganda war against the House of Saud.

## OFFICIAL ANTI-SAUDI STATEMENTS

**I**n an April 9 speech, Khamenei warned Riyadh that its Yemen intervention will fail: "The Saudis will definitely lose in this...Their nose will be rubbed to the soil." He explained his prediction: "The military capability of Zionists is many times stronger than the Saudis, and Gaza is a small region, but [Israel] could not succeed there, while Yemen is a vast country with dozens of millions of people." He also declared that "several inexperienced youngsters took over the affairs of [Saudi Arabia] and chose barbarism over decency. This will certainly cost them" (for more on his "inexperienced youngsters" comment, [see PolicyWatch 2412 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-inexperienced-youngster\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-inexperienced-youngster)).

Khamenei expressed further anger over Yemen in a May 6 speech, this time including the United States in his

criticism: "You see that what the Saudi government is doing in Yemen has no justification...Sending jets to target people and infrastructure, committing crimes, killing women and children, setting everywhere on fire has no justification. Nowadays America has no credibility in the eyes of Middle Eastern nations. They see the situation and explicitly say that they support [the Saudis]. They have no shame. Instead they complain about why we support [the Houthis]. We wanted to send [Yemenis] medications, not weapons. They do not need our weapons. Ansar Allah has full control over Yemen's military bases and army...The Iranian nation has chosen the happy-ending path, the right path...and [it] will succeed."

Khamenei continued this rhetoric in a May 16 speech: "Even Mecca pagans used to stop war in the sacred month [of Rajab]. Today those who...bomb Yemen a hundred times, two hundred times in twenty-four hours are worse and uglier than Mecca pagans." He also described the Islamic Republic as the "axis" of an "awakening" in the Middle East, then implied that the Saudis had been unsuccessfully fighting this axis for "thirty-five years."

Various other officials have echoed these sentiments. On April 27, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), stated, "God willing, the next wave of developments in the region will lead to the collapse of the House of Saud...[which] is on the verge of disappearance...We hope this will happen soon...Today the traitor Saudi has followed the footsteps of Zionist Israel." He also described the rise of the Houthis as "the latest achievement of the Islamic Revolution," stating that "whoever stands in the way...his defeat is guaranteed." On May 2, Khamenei's chief of staff, Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, stated, "The innocent people of Yemen are dying by Saudi bombs...Certainly by God's grace, the House of Saud will fall soon." The same day, Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani boasted that "the destiny of the House of Saud is the same as Saddam's." And on May 11, Mojtaba Zolnour, senior advisor to the Supreme Leader's IRGC representative, stated, "The Quran has authorized us to annihilate Israel, but who has given the Saudis the task of annihilating Yemen, and why should America support Saudi Arabia?"

## INCREASED INVOLVEMENT IN YEMEN

**W**hen the Houthis signed an agreement with the Yemeni government in September 2014 after several years of conflict, Zolnour congratulated "the Yemeni Shiites" -- referring to the Zaidi brand of Shia Islam practiced by the Houthis (for more on this, [see PolicyWatch 2364, "Yemen's Zaidis: A Window for Iranian Influence" \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/yemens-zaidis-a-window-for-iranian-influence\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/yemens-zaidis-a-window-for-iranian-influence)). He also asserted that "the Islamic Republic's victory in Yemen will open the gates to conquer Saudi Arabia."

At the same time, the Iranian government has expanded its assistance to Yemen. Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian described this support on March 13: "The Iranian private sector has negotiated with the Yemeni economic delegation. In addition to helping the development of infrastructure in Yemen, significant cooperation between the two countries will take place on various financial and economic matters...We support the Yemeni people in their war against terrorism and in helping their economic growth...The security of Yemen is the security of Iran and the Middle East...We will not let others play with our common security by their adventurous actions."

Iran has also been sending ships to Yemen during the Saudi-led intervention. Claiming that they contain humanitarian aid, government officials have warned other countries against intercepting them. On May 13, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Marzieh Afkham stated, "Those countries that attacked Yemen are not allowed to inspect Iranian ships." And deputy armed forces chief of staff Brig. Gen. Masoud Jazayeri specifically warned the United States and Saudi Arabia, declaring that interference with an Iranian ship bound for Yemen would "ignite a fire of war that would burn out of [their] control," adding that "there is a limit to Iranian restraint." Riyadh, however, has accused Iran of using ships and planes to resupply the Houthis with weapons. Tehran denies such support in much the same way it has denied its military support to Lebanese Hezbollah over the years, instead claiming that its assistance is solely humanitarian and political.

Meanwhile, the Shiite clergy in Iran has openly sympathized with the Houthi/Zaidi faction while condemning the Saudis. During a May 8 sermon, Assembly of Experts member Ahmad Khatami called the Saudi government "death men" whose policy in Yemen is the same as Israel's in Gaza. He also congratulated the "people of Yemen" for "fighting against the Saudis and, in truth, fighting against America, Britain, and the Zionist regime."

## RELATED INCIDENTS

**S**tate-controlled media have also turned to mythologizing the Iranian pilot who was unable to land at Yemen's Sana airport last month after coalition jets warned him to turn around and bombed the runways. Fars News Agency recounted Captain Behzad Sedoqatnia's "heroic" actions and described how Ayatollah Khamenei embraced him during a prayer session upon his return. The captain also reportedly said that he is ready to cancel all of his other flights and focus on humanitarian missions to Yemen.

In another notable incident, two teenagers claimed that they were abused by security guards at Saudi Arabia's Jeddah airport in March after making the Umrah pilgrimage to Mecca. According to Iran's Foreign Ministry, the guards separated the two boys from other passengers for "body searches"; the Judiciary Human Rights Committee claimed that this "sexual abuse" took place after a Saudi mufti in Jeddah issued a fatwa authorizing such harassment of Iranians. In response, hundreds of Iranians demonstrated in front of the Saudi embassy in Tehran, and Iranian authorities suspended all pilgrimage-related flights to the kingdom on April 13 (excluding travel for the compulsory Hajj pilgrimage later this year). A massive anti-Saudi (and, at times, anti-Arab) campaign soon unfolded on Persian social media, which helped the government justify its own anti-Saudi discourse.

## REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

**I**n a comment that provides insight on how the Islamic Republic views its overall regional strategy, deputy armed forces chief Brig. Gen. Ali Shadmani said the following on April 25: "In the resistance front, in the course of eight years of war [with Iraq], we were only able to organize some of the Kurds in northern Iraq against Saddam. Now all those people who are interested in fighting against arrogant powers in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen stand under the flag of Iran's Supreme Leader...We declare publicly that we will support [Yemeni resistance] as we did in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan."

More recently, Hossein Shariatmadari, editor-in-chief of the arch-conservative newspaper *Kayhan*, bashed a prominent official on May 12 for speaking of Arab-Iranian reconciliation. Expediency Council secretary and former commander-in-chief Mohsen Rezai had told al-Mayadeen television that "our weapons are for defending Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and the whole Islamic world. I am certain that if anyone invades Saudi borders, we would defend Saudi Arabia." In response, Shariatmadari called Riyadh a "regime that has committed disastrous crimes" and said no one "has the right to defend the incarnated body of corruption and decay called the House of Saud...After the barbarous Saudi attack on Yemen, it is the legal and religious right of Yemeni Muslims to attack Saudi Arabia's borders." He also called the kingdom a "puppet state" of America and Israel.

## CONCLUSION

**T**he Islamic Republic views the Yemen conflict as an opportunity to advance its regional objectives by leveraging a Zaidi Shiite armed group (the Houthis), similar to its relationship with Shiite Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon. It also sees Yemen as a battlefield in its proxy war with Saudi Arabia, a longtime competitor for regional hegemony. If the Saudi government responds by pushing anti-Shiite policies at home and next door in Bahrain, it will only exacerbate regional sectarian conflict and justify Iran's support to Shiite armed groups more than ever.

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