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Who are the Houthis?

Ansar Allah's Islamic Propaganda in Yemen and Beyond

Jonathan Franco

The Houthi movement, also known as “Ansar Allah,” has received considerable attention in recent years and even more so since the Houthi intervention in the Israel-Gaza war. Ansar Allah’s rise to power in Yemen in 2014-2015,¹ its war against the Saudi-led coalition since 2015,² the nature of its relations with Iran,³ and its attacks on international shipping through the Red Sea since 2023 have led to growing interest in the group.⁴ However, while Houthi actions have been discussed extensively, little has been written about the way that Ansar Allah justifies these policies. Israeli analysts Heistein and Stoin noted in 2021 that “although the Houthi threat to Israel has made headlines on numerous occasions in recent years, it remains poorly understood.”⁵ This remains the case, and not just in the Israeli context. Ansar Allah’s propaganda is often overlooked and it provides an important window into how the Houthis interpret, or at least want others to interpret, who they are and their regional agenda. Ansar Allah’s official website⁶ documents how the Houthis have chosen to legitimize themselves through Islam. Houthi propaganda mobilizes broad

¹ For example: Uzi Rabi, *Yemen: Revolution, Civil War, and Unification* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 136-192; “[The Houthi Movement and the War in Yemen: Developments and Significance](#),” *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, March 14, 2023.

² Bruce Riedel, “Saudi Arabia’s Role in the Yemen Crisis,” in *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) 115-130; “[Why Saudi Arabia is Staying on the Sidelines in the Red Sea Conflict](#),” *Foreign Policy*, January 16, 2024.

³ For example: “[Yemen’s Houthis – and Why They’re Not Simply a Proxy of Iran](#),” *The Conversation*, September 19, 2019; “[Yemen’s Houthis and the Expansion of Iran’s Axis of Resistance](#),” American Enterprise Institute, March 2022; “[The Danger of Calling the Houthis an Iranian Proxy](#),” *Brookings*, September 3, 2024.

⁴ For example: “[Who Are the Houthis and Why are They Attacking Red Sea Ships?](#),” *BBC*, March 15, 2024; “[The Ship Operators Shrugging Off Houthi Attacks](#),” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 16, 2024.

⁵ “[Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Understanding the Houthi Threat to Israel](#),” *INSS*, April 27, 2021.

⁶ Ansar Allah’s official [website](#).

Islamic arguments to obscure its Zaydi uniqueness, to justify its wars inside and outside Yemen, and to validate its selection of allies and enemies.

Historically, Houthi Islamic identity is unique. Ansar Allah consisted primarily of Shi‘i Zaydi Muslims, a minority that makes up about 30 percent of Yemen’s population and hardly exists elsewhere. The Houthi movement emerged in the Yemeni region of Sa‘ada during the 1990s as a Zaydi response to both Sunni-Salafi forces that gained momentum in the area, and the government in Sana‘a, seen not only as corrupt but as oppressive toward the Zaydi minority.⁷ The movement’s first leader, Zaydi religious leader Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi, promoted a religious doctrine that was unconventional even within Zaydi circles, as he emphasized the intersection between Zaydi and Twelver Shi‘ism, which is practiced primarily in Iran. Al-Houthi’s unusual interpretation of Islam led to major disputes with more traditional Zaydi scholars, who viewed him as an intolerant radical.⁸

Perhaps to overcome the theological and ideological isolation of the movement, over time Husayn al-Houthi developed an inclusive language, which addressed “Muslims” broadly and equated the enemies of the Houthis with the enemies of Islam. According to the movement’s narrative, it has always refused to label itself as “Zaydi”; rather, it has accommodated all Muslim believers who wish to see Islamic rule in Yemen, and to rid Yemen and its region of harmful American and Israeli influence.⁹ Hashem al-Dhiqa, a Houthi intellectual, used the teachings of Husayn al-Houthi to outline the Houthi political agenda: topple the pro-Western and corrupt government in Sana‘a; curb the harmful colonial, and particularly the American, hold over Yemen; rebuild Yemen on the foundations of true Islam and Arab identity as an alternative to imported American culture; cultivate a relationship with Muslim and Arab countries instead of with the West; counter Wahhabis and Salafis who threaten true Islam; and assist Islamic powers such as Iran, the Palestinian guerillas, and Hizballah against non-Islamic or “false Islamic” oppressive forces (i.e., Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States).¹⁰ Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi, who previously led the competing, Saudi-backed Yemeni government in Aden, was denounced by Ansar Allah as a traitor, an American-Saudi collaborator, and an ally of al-Qa‘ida.¹¹ The Saudis have been similarly condemned by the Houthis as allies of the United States and al-

⁷ For more on this issue, see: Rabi, *Yemen*, 136-192; “[The Houthi Movement and the War in Yemen: Developments and Significance](#),” *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, March 14, 2023, 1-3.

⁸ Rabi, *Yemen*, 155-156; “[The Full Story of the Houthis and the Zaydiyya in Yemen](#)” [Arabic], *al-Arabiyya*, July 10, 2004.

⁹ “[Know Ansar Allah](#)” [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, December 16, 2023.

¹⁰ “[Ansar Allah: Principles, Politics, and Goals \(According to the Notes of Founder Sir Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi\)](#)” [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, March 22, 2020.

¹¹ For example: “[1000 Days Since the American-Saudi Collapse in Yemen](#)” [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, December 20, 2017; “[Mohammed Abd al-Salaam: Hady and al-Qa‘ida Are in One Battle, Which Harmed the Southern Cause and Did Nothing to Promote it But Worked to Fragment It](#)” [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, March 21, 2015.

Qa'ida. The al-Sa'ud family itself was also discredited through accusations of a hidden Jewish heritage, Wahhabi extremism, and secularization.¹² The Houthis claim that they protect the local Islamic and Arab identities from those who betrayed these traditions and chose to collaborate with hostile, external forces.¹³

In addition to the call for unity of all Muslims against the infidels, Husayn al-Houthi's legacy has also blurred the lines between religion, nation, and civilization. In 2002 he tied the Zionist "cancerous tumor" in the Middle East to "Jewish" conspiracies in the media and elsewhere.¹⁴ The following year, in 2003, the iconic Houthi slogan was coined, similarly defining the movement's political goals in both religious and national terms: "Allah Akbar, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory for Islam."¹⁵ While Hamas and other Islamic movements aiming to annihilate Israel appease Western audiences by claiming they are anti-Zionist, not antisemitic,¹⁶ Ansar Allah still openly fosters antisemitic tropes about Jewish world domination.¹⁷ The Houthis also explain political developments through a religious prism. For example, one Ansar Allah intellectual has suggested an ideological connection between Protestant Christianity, Zionism, and Capitalism – and argues this ideological affinity drives American support for Israel.¹⁸ The organization's discourse does not distinguish between Israel and Judaism, between the West and Christianity, or between the Muslim-Arab countries and Islam; these three religions are locked in a global war, in which Islam must triumph. Branding Ansar Allah as "Islamic" instead of Zaydi or Yemeni and highlighting a worldwide civilizational-religious struggle allows the movement to garner support among Yemenis and other Muslims. In doing so, they present the Yemeni civil war as a just Islamic war against infidels and corrupt invaders, as opposed to a domestic sectarian struggle, a tribal war, or a Shi'i-Sunni conflict.

The Islamic label also legitimizes the Houthi activity beyond Yemen, most notably Ansar Allah's alliance with the Iranian Axis of Resistance. From a practical point of view, this

¹² For example: "[Saudi Judaism and the Real Islam](#)" [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, January 29, 2020; "[6 Years of Resistance Against the Jewish Alliance](#)" [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, March 31, 2021; "[Saudi Soft Power: from Wahhabi Extremism to the Secularization of Islam](#)" [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, May 27, 2023.

¹³ "[The Yemeni Faithful Identity. A Curriculum and Belonging that Thwarts the Aggression's Plans](#)" [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, February 29, 2020.

¹⁴ "[A Cry in the Face of the Arrogant](#)" [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, February 10, 2017.

¹⁵ Lucas Winter, "Conflict in Yemen: Simple People, Complicated Circumstances," *Middle East Policy*, Volume 28:1(2011), 103.

¹⁶ For example, Clause 16 in Hamas's 2017 Charter notes that the conflict with Zionism is not a conflict with the Jews, and Clause 17 rejects the persecution of any human on the basis of nationality, religion, or sect.

¹⁷ For example: "[When We Were Negligent and Fell Short, God Placed Us at the Mercy of the Jews Then He Struck Them with Humiliation and Poverty](#)" [Arabic], June 26, 2023; "[The Jewish Octopus: A Hidden Power that Governs and Controls the World](#)" [Arabic], July 11, 2024; "[The Protocols of the Elders of Zion... From Theory to Practice](#)" [Arabic], October 24, 2024, *Ansar Allah*.

¹⁸ "[Protestantism and the Foundations of American Support for Zionism and Relations to the Capitalism System](#)" [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, October 27, 2024.

partnership seems almost obvious. In the religious-ideological sense, the Houthis are Zaydi Shi‘is; although their creed does not correspond exactly to the Iranian Twelver Shi‘ism, it is close enough for Tehran to include Ansar Allah in its network of regional non-Sunni allies, like the Asad regime in Syria and Hizballah in Lebanon. Houthi support for regional Islamic struggles such as that of Hamas or Hizballah against Israel and the United States aligns well with Iran’s regional aspirations. Ansar Allah’s war against the Aden government, backed by the Saudi-led coalition,¹⁹ creates an opportunity for Iran, a bitter rival, to weaken the regional influence of Riyadh and its allies.²⁰ And from a geopolitical standpoint, Yemen is perfectly situated to ensure a vital Iranian interest, controlling the Bab al-Mandab Strait that connects the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. This provides Iran with the ability to exercise indirect control over a critical choke point of international shipping. Yemen also shares a 1,300-kilometer border with Iran’s rival Saudi Arabia and is also close to the other Gulf States, making it an ideal launching pad for attacks against Tehran’s enemies.²¹

Ansar Allah justifies its alliance with Iran’s Axis of Resistance by leaning on the common denominator of Islam, primarily within the context of the holy war against Israel. The Houthis describe Palestine as one of the most important Islamic territories; it is geographically central to the Arab world, and religiously significant as it served as the cradle of many of God’s messages and prophets. Houthi propaganda warns of an unholy alliance between Israel, the United States, and those Arab states that chose Arab-Israeli normalization – and of course between all these powers and the “deceitful Jews” who seek to distort Islam and terrorize its believers. Much like Yemen itself, Palestine is presented as a frontline in the war between Islam and anti-Islam, with the Houthis and the Axis of Resistance protecting the faith. Ansar Allah stresses that the only acceptable solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the liberation of the land and the elimination of Israel.²² Given this Houthi discourse, it is unsurprising that after developing missiles that could reach Israel,²³ and after reaching a ceasefire deal in April 2023 that froze its war with the Saudis,²⁴

¹⁹ On this, see: Bruce Riedel, “Saudi Arabia’s Role in the Yemen Crisis,” in *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) 115-130.

²⁰ “[Why Saudi Arabia and Iran are Bitter Rivals](#),” *BBC*, September 16, 2019.

²¹ Roi Kais, “[Ballistic Missiles and ‘Death to Israel’: This is How the Houthis Became the Middle East’s New Threat](#)” [Hebrew], *Kan*, February 18, 2022.

²² For example: “[The Correct Position Which We Must Take Toward the Issue of Palestine](#)” [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, July 23, 2017; “[‘Israel is a Cancerous Tumor’.. Where To Will You Escape from Palestine?](#)” [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, May 23, 2019; “[Palestine... The Forward Barricade, the First Trench, the Great Cause of the Nation](#)” [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, April 30, 2022.

²³ “[The Houthis Threaten: ‘Soon we will have Rockets that would Reach Jerusalem’](#)” [Hebrew], *Ma’ariv*, October 1, 2017; “[Houthi Military Media Publishes Propaganda Video With Hebrew Subtitles Threatening Israel With Cruise Missile Attacks: ‘There Is More To Come!’](#),” *MEMRI*, August 30, 2019.

²⁴ “[Eilat is in the Crosshairs](#)” [Hebrew], *Walla*, April 19, 2023.

Ansar Allah joined the war against Israel alongside the Axis of Resistance by attacking Israel with missiles and drones,²⁵ and by blockading Israeli shipping through the Red Sea.²⁶

Islam has served as a prime Houthi justification to legitimize Ansar Allah's uprising in Yemen; its selection of allies and enemies throughout the Middle East; and its intervention in the current Israel-Gaza war. It is noteworthy that while some Arabs outside Yemen praised the Houthi intervention in the conflict since October 7,²⁷ polls measuring Yemeni public opinion in recent years suggest that this media strategy is domestically ineffective. A 2017 survey revealed that Yemenis are most concerned about their poverty, the continuation of the war in Yemen, and the general state of the country,²⁸ and not necessarily about some cross-country Islamic struggle. A 2024 survey evaluating Yemeni views about the Houthi Red Sea blockade as part of the ongoing war found that support for Ansar Allah's naval operations peaked at only 35 percent. Furthermore, no more than 8 percent of the respondents expressed positive views about the Houthi movement. Many were concerned that the Red Sea operations would drag Yemen into a regional conflict and exacerbate the already severe economic situation and internal Yemeni sectarian conflict.²⁹ Nonetheless, Ansar Allah's propaganda remains unchanged, upholding Islam and support for Palestine in the face of the Zionist invaders and their anti-Islamic allies.

Jonathan Franco is a Researcher at the *Moshe Dayan Center (MDC) for Middle Eastern and African Studies*, Tel Aviv University, and a PhD candidate in the London School of Economics (LSE).

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²⁵ “[Israel at War – Statistics Updated Live](#)” [Hebrew], *INSS*, November 7, 2024.

²⁶ “[The Yemeni Armed Forces During the Year Since al-Aqsa Flood... The Cross-Border Support](#)” [Arabic], *Ansar Allah*, October 9, 2024.

²⁷ “[‘Thank God for the Houthis’: Why Arab World is Backing Yemen Rebels](#),” *Financial Times*, January 26, 2024.

²⁸ “[Yemen’s War as Seen from the Local Level](#),” *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 2017.

²⁹ “[A Snapshot of Yemeni Public Sentiment on Red Sea Developments](#),” *Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies*, October 16, 2024.