

## The Perspective of “Coup Forces,” Saleh and Houthi Elements

### Abstract:

From the onset of the Saada wars (2004 – 2010), the Houthis have been described as an Iranian proxy and a security threat. Ali Abdullah Saleh long deployed this Iranian narrative to obtain budgetary and military support from his long-established international allies, the United States and Saudi Arabia. Conversely, the Houthis – though admitting an Iranian influence on the ideological level – always denied receiving support from Tehran.

The 2014 takeover of the capital Sanaa fundamentally reshaped the relationship between the Houthis and Saleh and their respective connections with international allies. The Houthis, on the one hand, managed to expand a previously negligible international network, establishing strong ties with regional Shiite allies and opening channels of communication with the international community. Saleh, on the other hand, embarked on a risky alliance with the Houthis to weaken his internal rivals, losing his international allies and, eventually, his own life.

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### Introduction

The “marriage of convenience” between the Houthi movement and former president of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh was a decisive factor in the fall of Sanaa in September 2014. Saleh had opposed the Houthis between 2004 and 2010 in six rounds of war largely fought in the Houthi heartland of Saada. Ideologically the Houthis had constructed their own identity in systematic opposition to Saleh and, in particular, to his regime’s international alliances.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Saleh’s most valued allies were the US and Saudi Arabia. After the al-Qaeda bombing of the USS Cole in Aden and the 9/11 attack, the Yemeni president enrolled in George Bush’s global “war on terrorism.” As a reward, the US generously provided budgetary and military aid that Saleh invested to expand Yemen’s security apparatus, placing it under the grip of his own family and tribe (Phillips, 2011). At the same time, Saleh managed to normalize Yemen’s relationship with Saudi Arabia and settle the thorny issue of their shared border through the 2000 Treaty of Jidda. Riyadh-financed Salafi schools in Yemen had long supported a range of political and tribal actors in Yemen, including members of the regime. [Note: Bruce Riedel’s Chapter Eight explains the historic role Saudi Prince Sultan played as the government official most responsible for building the kingdom’s patronage networks inside Yemen.]

By 2001, Saleh’s perceived subjugation to the US and Saudi Arabia came under the scrutiny of a young religious scholar from Saada, Hussain al-Houthi. From its inception, the political ideology of the Houthi movement revolved around two axes: an internal opposition to the Salafi threat and the Yemeni government’s socio-economic policies; and an external admiration of Iran’s Islamic revolution. The movement, founded in 1982 by a Zaydi scholar from Saada named Saleh Fillayte, was initially conceived as a study group on the 1979 Iranian revolution (Lux, 2009, p. 376). It evolved in 1986 to become the Union of the Believing Youth (BY), which aimed to teach Zaydi thought to high school students (Shiban, 2018). The BY operated throughout the 1990s by organizing summer schools and cultural events (Salmoni, Loidolt, & Wells, 2010, p. 99).

Already in 1998, some Saada *shaykhs* belonging to the General People’s Congress (GPC) – Saleh’s party – warned their leader that the movement was becoming more “Iranian”: slogans of the Islamic Revolution and Hezbollah flags were spreading in Saada, and an office of the Lebanese party was opened (Mansur, 2015; Sharafi, personal interview, 2018). It was in

2000 that Hussain al-Houthi, after taking control over part of the BY network, fully developed an anti-imperialist narrative. By fiercely opposing US interventionism, he positioned the movement on the “axis of resistance” alongside Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas, Iran, and Iraq. He also added Saleh to the “forces of evil” – as he called them: the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

In the wake of the youth revolution in 2011, contradictions within Saleh’s regime appeared. In November 2011, he accepted to step down from the presidency. As he sought to regain leverage in the following years, he gradually forged a risky alliance with the Houthis. During the summer of 2014, “blinded by revenge” and disowning his previous international and internal allies, Saleh overtly embraced the Houthis and pushed for the takeover of Sanaa (Anonymous 2, personal interview, 2019). For their part, Houthi leaders threw in their lot with Saleh in order to gain access to his patronage networks and coopt officials within the governing structure, strategic missile and coastal defense forces, and national intelligence agencies (Knights, 2018, p. 17). By military means, they extended their influence far beyond the narrow power base of their northern homeland.

### **Background, 2000-2011**

Between 1993 and 1997 Hussain al-Houthi – son of Badruddin, a renowned Zaydi scholar – served as MP for Hizb al-Haqq, a party representing interests of the Zaydi community in Yemen. Between 1994 and 1996 he visited Iran with his father, and then in 1999 he moved to Sudan to study Quranic sciences, returning to Saada in 2000 (Brandt, 2017, p. 131). Building on Ayatollah Khomeini’s thought and Hezbollah’s practice, he embraced an anti-imperialist worldview. In his speeches, later collected in pamphlets (*malazim*) that nowadays stand at the core of Houthi ideology, Husain depicted the ‘war on terror’ as an American instrument of domination and Saleh as an American agent. By embracing strongly anti-Semitic rhetoric, he imagined a global chessboard where the Jews pulled the strings of the US, and the US of Israel. He encouraged the liberation of Jerusalem, promoted autarky, demonized consumption – especially of ‘Israeli-American’ products – and warned the Islamic Nation against the danger of Western cultural hegemony.

An apocryphal story recounts that Saleh first perceived the Houthis as a threat in 2003, when they shouted their slogan – “God is great, Death to America” – to his face during a Friday prayer in Saada (Fattah, 2009). Beginning in 2004 when Hussain al-Houthi was killed by Yemeni armed forces, Saleh framed the conflict in Saada as a local instance of a regional Sunni-Shia divide, accusing Iran of supporting the Houthis and describing them as Twelver Shiites who were a threat to the US. In 2005, Abu Bakr al-Qirbi, foreign minister and a member of the GPC, pushed this rhetoric further, describing the Houthis as a terrorist organization financed by foreign actors (i.e. Iran and Hezbollah). He requested US military and logistical support in Saada (Wikileaks, 2005). The Houthis never denied an ideological connection with Iran or made any secret of their many visits to the country. However, both Badruddin and Abdulmalik – Hussain’s brother who assumed leadership of the movement in 2005 – rejected any accusation of receiving economic or military support from Iran. Abdulmalik described the movement’s position in the Saada wars as purely defensive and stressed its adherence to human rights laws (Salmoni et al., 2010, p. 305-307).

During the Saada conflicts, another brother of Hussain named Yahya al-Houthi handled most of the movement’s diplomatic relationships. Yahya had been elected a member of parliament for the GPC in 2003. In 2005 he fled to Libya, and in 2006 he applied for international protection in Germany. A moderate character, more interested in religion than politics, he served as an international spokesperson for the Houthis, representing them in Libya, Germany, Qatar, Iran, and Iraq (VS18 2, personal interview, 2019). His aim was to make the international community aware of the “hidden” war in Saada and stop it. To this end, he also mobilized

international networks of Hashemite people (i.e. descendants of the Prophet Mohammed) with whom the Houthis allegedly shared their ancestry (al-Madhaji, personal interview, 2019).

In 2006, when Moammar Gaddafi decided to meddle in the Saada issue, Yahya intermittently visited Tripoli, triggering Saleh to accuse Gaddafi of sympathizing with the Houthis; he asked the US to dissuade Tripoli from interfering in Saada (Brandt, 2017, pp. 208-210). In June 2007, Yahya established contacts with the German Minister of Foreign Affairs (Mareb Press, 2007) and opened a channel of communication with the Arab League (Siraji, 2010). In the previous month, the US put pressure on Saleh to end the war in Saada and suggested Qatar as a suitable mediator because of its economic largeness, lack of previous involvement in Yemen, and its positive relations with the US (Brandt, 2017, p. 238). Afterward Yahya flew to Qatar to convey the Houthi movement's demands, and he negotiated the first and second Doha agreements that temporarily halted the war (Brandt, 2017, pp. 239, 247). In spite of Qatar's efforts, a fifth round of war erupted. In March 2009, Saleh referred to Qatari mediation as "a failure," alleging it led Houthis to see themselves as "equal to the state" (Siraji, 2010).

Up to early 2009, the Government of Yemen (GoY) maintained a "public appearance of normal bilateral cooperation" with Iran (Wikileaks, 2009). However, with the resumption of hostilities in Saada, many state officials believed that Iran was turning the Houthis into a Yemeni Hizbullah (Wikileaks, 2009). In September 2009, the Yemeni air force launched a fatal airstrike on a camp of displaced civilians in Saada, prompting unprecedented international media coverage of the conflict. Journalists framed the war as a local instance of Iranian expansionism. Saleh made full use of this media narrative (Hill, 2017, p. 194) for the purpose of obtaining monetary and strategic support from the US and Saudi Arabia. Al-Qirbi lodged an official complaint with the Iranian Embassy in Sanaa, accusing Tehran of supporting the Houthis (Wikileaks, 2009).

In November 2009, Houthi militias trespassed into Saudi territory, thus internationalizing the conflict, causing Riyadh to react immediately with airstrikes. Even before this escalation, the Houthis verbally attacked Saudi Arabia for its support of Saleh. Following Riyadh's military intervention, a propaganda war erupted between Yemeni, Saudi, and Iranian outlets, over alleged Iranian support for the Houthis. When the so-called "Arab Spring" started slightly more than a year later, and Houthi leaders declared their support for the street protests, it helped the rebel movement break out of its isolation in Saada. The critical attitude of Houthi leaders towards the Gulf initiative and all foreign intervention in Yemen gave them a degree of popularity in Sanaa, where they aimed to co-opt liberal leaning youth and civil society activists, while appearing as a 'civic' political force.

### **Yemen's Political Transition and Collapse, 2012- 2014**

On January 31, 2012, a conference took place in Tehran entitled "The Youth and the Islamic Awakening" which included, among the speakers, the supreme leader of Iran, 'Ali Khamenei, the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Iraqi prime minister Ibrahim al-Ja'afari. The Houthis – who started referring to themselves as Ansarullah (Partisans of God) in 2010 – contacted Yemeni activists to attend it. By 2012, they organized other conferences in Lebanon and Iran, offering advocacy training to youth activists and women, while in some cases organizing meetings with Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei (Activist 2, personal interview, 2012). According to some activists, the conferences in Iran amounted to a "PR campaign" for the Iranian Revolution, and those in Beirut were clearly organized by Hizbullah (Activist 1, personal interview, 2012).

During the same year, a number of Yemeni TV channels based in southern Beirut (Lebanon) started broadcasting into Yemen. In addition to al-Masirah – Ansarullah's own channel –, al-Sahat TV recruited a number of liberal leaning journalists who received training in Beirut.

In April 2014, al-Sahat's former general manager, Ahmed al-Zorqah, revealed that the channel was, in fact, Iranian-owned and run by a Hizbullah leader known as Nasser Akhdar (*Al Araby*, 2014). According to al-Zorqah, Nasser Akhdar and his team were in charge of Ansarullah's media strategy.

After Abdurabbo Mansour Hadi was elected President in a single-candidate election in February 2012, he maintained Saleh's hostile attitude to Iran. In July 2012, he accused Tehran of aiming to push the country towards civil war, repeating this during his visit to Washington in late September. In an attempt to weaken the previous regime's power base, he removed Ahmed Ali – Saleh's son – from the command of the Republican Guard, appointing him ambassador in the UAE. However, this allowed Saleh to maintain a privileged channel of communication in Dubai.

In February 2013, the Yemeni coast guard, with the help of the US Navy, seized the Jihan 1 vessel which was carrying weapons believed to be destined for the Houthis (*UNPoE*, 2015, p. 38). As testified by one of us – Baraa Shibani – President Hadi stated that Yemeni intelligence had Iranian weapon experts in its custody. Iran rejected these allegations, but the incident made the Yemeni public aware that Iranian involvement went far beyond the 'soft power' initiatives such as media training.

On March 18, 2013, the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) started in Sanaa. The Houthis needed to reconcile the use of military violence in Saada, Hajjah, and al-Jawf with the liberal political approach they upheld in the NDC. According to Shibani, they aimed to frame violence outside the conference as triggered by the Muslim Brotherhood. To this end, youth and women activists kept contacts with US and EU diplomats, while liberal Ansarullah representatives in the NDC, e.g. Abdulkarim al-Khaiwani and Ahmed Sharaf al-Din, helped build relations with the UN envoy's office in Sanaa. However, the murder of Sharaf al-Din and another prominent Ansarullah representative in the NDC, Abdulkarim Jadban, signaled the decline of the "moderate" approach.

Beginning in February 2014, the Houthis made vast territorial gains, culminating in their takeover of Amran and the pro-Islah 310<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade's camp in July. Saudi Arabia became alarmed at moves that were only made possible by the Houthi alliance with Saleh. According to Saudi sources, Riyadh attempted to reconcile Saleh and President Hadi. By then, however, Saleh was willing to risk his relationship with Riyadh in order to weaken Hadi and Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar. In September, "a moment of chaos" unfolded in Riyadh as Houthi and Saleh forces occupied Sanaa, seizing al-Ahmar's 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Brigade camp. When Aden fell to the coup forces in early March 2015, Saudi leaders "felt like Saleh stabbed them in the back" (Anonymous 1, personal interview, 2019).

In this phase, Saleh planned to weaken his internal enemies through his alliance with the Houthis, but by doing so he pushed Saudi Arabia towards an alliance of necessity with Islah. There were Saudi suspicions that the Houthi-Saleh coup followed Iranian orders, but neither the Houthis nor Saleh were under Tehran's control. According to Ali al-Bukhaiti, an Ansarullah member of the NDC, the coup leaders decided to seize control of Sanaa on their own without advice of Iranian authorities (personal interview, 2019). But the Iranians held divided opinions on the matter: Iranian officials in their Sanaa embassy opposed the coup, but the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) favored it. Al-Bukhaiti added that some European diplomats welcomed the coup because it led to the takeover of the Islah-leaning al-Iman University, founded by Abdulmajid al-Zindani, thus diminishing the influence of the Salafi *shaykh*.

Following their takeover of Sanaa, the relationship between Houthi leaders and Iran became more evident. In late September, two Iranian prisoners were released from jail, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) reportedly started training Houthi fighters on a small island off the Eritrean coast (*UNPOE*, 2015, p. 15). In the new year, following President

Hadi's short term resignation, Houthi leaders signed a February agreement to increase air transport between Sanaa and Tehran (Al Manar, 2015a). Reports suggested that Iranian and Hezbollah trainers entered Yemen by this means, while 300 Yemenis reached Iran for training (Knights, 2018, p. 18).

Back in the fall of 2014, Hasan al-Humran – head of Ansarullah's Foreign Relations – attempted to position the party as a potential ally of Egypt because of its common opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. He defined Cairo as a “*qiblah* for the Arabs” (Al Bawabah, 2015). Concurrently, Mohammed Abdulsalam – a veteran of the Saada wars, son of Saleh Fillaytah, and spokesperson of Ansarullah – and Yusif al-Fayshi, a GPC Hashemite from Saada, maintained an open channel of communication with Saudi Arabia, attempting to reduce tensions with the northern kingdom. According to Saudi sources, negotiations between Riyadh and Ansarullah continued until March 2015, with the aim of de-escalating tensions on the border (Anonymous 1, personal interview, 2019).

### **The Outbreak of Yemen's War, 2015**

Shortly after President Hadi tendered his resignation in January 2015, the Houthis promulgated the Constitutional Declaration on February 6, dissolving the parliament and appointing Muhammad Ali al-Houthi – leader of the Houthis' military wing – President of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee (SRC). Afterward, sixteen embassies followed Hadi's government in departing from Sanaa to Aden and later to Riyadh and Jidda. By the end of February, only five countries maintained diplomatic representations in Sanaa: Iran, Russia, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine (Testot, 2017). When the agreement was signed to increase the number of flights between Tehran and Sanaa, the SRC also strengthened its relationship with Iran through a commercial agreement in the fields of oil and electricity (Al Manar, 2015b). During the same period, Hussain al-Izzi – a Hashemite and veteran of the Saada wars – replaced al-Humran as head of Ansarullah's Foreign Relations. At the beginning of March, he led a delegation to Moscow, and subsequently, to Cairo.

On March 7, 2015, Muhammad Abdulsalam went to Saudi Arabia to propose a Houthi withdrawal from Saudi territory and recognition of Hadi's government in exchange for a guarantee that Saada would not be attacked (Baydani, 2016). According to Saudi sources, Saudi officials ignored him and demanded to talk with Ansarullah's leadership. A letter was sent via Abu Dhabi to Saleh for him to convey to the Houthis: Riyadh was prepared to negotiate but on condition the Houthis did not seize Aden (Anonymous 1, personal interview, 2019). According to GPC sources, Saleh was convinced that war would be to the Houthis' advantage, not his own. Thus, he pledged to ally with Riyadh if the Houthis did not stop their military advances upon Aden and begin operating solely as a political party. The Saudis, however, did not trust Saleh (VS18 1, personal interview, 2019).

A couple of days prior to the first GCC coalition airstrikes on March 26, 2015, Ahmed Ali Saleh flew to Riyadh to ward off foreign intervention. He wanted to present his father as the only person who could block further Houthi advances (VS18 2, personal interview, 2019). The Saudis did not receive him. Weeks later on May 10, Saudi-led coalition airstrikes targeted Saleh's house in Sanaa. According to GPC sources, Saleh reacted by throwing in his lot with the Houthis. He not only feared for his life but he did not want to appear opposed to the resistance against foreign aggression. At this time, Saleh revealed to Houthi commanders the location of missile silos at the Fajj Attan base, granting them access to the site (Anonymous 4, personal interview, 2019).

From the beginning of the conflict, Oman distanced itself from the GCC in line with its traditional foreign policy of acting as a neutral third-party mediator. In May, Muscat hosted a Houthi delegation led by Muhammad Abdulsalam and negotiations took place with the US and

low level Saudi intelligence officers. After meeting the UN envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the Houthis agreed to attend peace talks in Geneva without imposing conditions.

In an attempt to build greater international support, a seven-member Houthi delegation led by Muhammad al-Qibli, a tribal shaykh from al-Beida, travelled to Baghdad on May 25 to meet Vice President Nuri al-Maliki who called for an immediate halt to airstrikes in Yemen (Al Jazeera, 2015). The delegation also met Jasim al-Jaza'iri, a member of the political office of the Hizbullah battalions in Iraq. Al-Jaza'iri announced his support for the Houthis, drawing a parallel between Yemen and Iraq while accusing Washington and Riyadh of supporting ISIS or "Daesh" (Al Muraqib Al Iraqi, 2015). In a symbol of Ansarullah's links to the Shiite world, the Houthi delegation visited Najaf and Karbala.

The peace talks at Geneva in June failed to achieve any useful result. Commenting on the negotiations, Muhammad Ali al-Houthi praised the role of Russia and Oman in the mediation process, while strongly criticizing the UN and blaming its members for backing Saudi "aggression" (Hawamdi, 2015). He also expressed profound distrust of the US ambassador Matthew Tueller, recalling that the later negotiations at Biel in December were cancelled at Tueller's request (Nord, 2018). These allegations were echoed by Muhammad Abdulsalam's testimony that Tueller pressured him to accept an immediate surrender to Hadi or face the threat of economic warfare (Emmons, 2017). According to GPC sources, however, the peace negotiations failed because of disagreements between the 'southerners' of Hadi's government and the Houthi 'northerners' who wanted the war to continue (VS18 1, personal interview, 2019).

According to leaked documents (Hashim, 2016), Hussain al-Izzi established an international diplomatic network between January and April 2016, resulting in the creation of an *ad hoc* Foreign Ministry Committee that aimed to co-opt Yemeni diplomats abroad. Many GPC diplomats changed sides despite formal pretenses of maintaining party loyalty (VS18 2, personal interview, 2019). Al-Izzi reportedly declined an Iranian offer to serve as a mediator with Riyadh, citing tensions between the two countries. But when the Russian ambassador offered him a draft peace proposal with three stages, the Houthis went public with it in June and September 2016: first, a Houthi halt to shelling for a Saudi cessation of airstrikes; second, a Houthi withdrawal from Saudi territories for a Saudi withdrawal from Yemeni territories; and third, a serious commitment to peace negotiations.

Back in February 2016, Muhammad Abdulsalam suggested that "Americans have waged the war to bring Yemen under their mandate again and force it into accepting US hegemony and domination," while simultaneously depicting other international actors as mere US puppets (Abna, 2016). Perhaps inspired by the rapid advance of enemy forces toward Sanaa, his statements were intended to send a message that the Houthis were open to negotiations with Saudi Arabia. At the beginning of March, a Houthi delegation led by Muhammad Abdulsalam went to Zahran al-Janub in Saudi Arabia to discuss a limited agreement aimed at stopping clashes on the border in order to secure it. This alarmed internal and external allies of the Houthis. Saleh feared that direct negotiations could lead to him being offered to Riyadh as inducement to reach agreement. Iran feared estrangement and was quick to respond when Iranian Brigadier General Masud al-Jaza'iri announced Tehran's intention to support the Yemeni people with any means and on any level, as it had been doing in Syria (Bozorgmehr, 2016). These words were clearly meant to be heard by the Saudi government because Iran saw its support for Yemen as a response to Saudi actions in Syria (Zimmerman, 2016).

On March 18, a prisoner swap took place between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis: Muhammad Abdulsalam described it as a first step of mutual understanding and humanitarian concern. The rapprochement with Saudi Arabia was aimed at excluding President Hadi from the negotiations, thus delegitimizing his government. In June, during the Kuwait talks, Abdulsalam described relations with Saudi Arabia in extremely positive terms. In an interview with Al Watan, he spoke of foreseeing a solution to the conflict through direct negotiations with

Riyadh. Although his words were in accord with the views of the leadership of Ansarullah, he was harshly criticized within the movement and in Iranian media (Al Yemeny Al Jadid, 2016). In July, when hopes of a successful outcome of the Kuwait talks started fading, he disowned his previous statements and, in a long interview with the Iranian television network Mayadeen, for which he appeared in traditional Yemeni garb, he revived the anti-Saudi rhetoric (Abdulrahman, 2016).

There are various hypotheses to explain why the 2016 negotiations failed. Ali al-Bukhaiti argued that internal clashes between Hussain al-Izzi and Muhammad Abdulsalam disrupted the process. According to the same source, the Houthis rejected the UN envoy's proposal – despite the US guaranteeing its implementation – because they wanted a more comprehensive agreement (personal interview, 2019). Saudi sources confirmed that armed forces loyal to Saleh's GPC provoked clashes on the border in violation of the ceasefire (Anonymous 1, personal interview, 2019). It is also possible that Iran directly hampered the talks in order to maintain leverage on Saudi Arabia by keeping the war going. After the failure of the Kuwait talks, Tehran and Hizbullah put pressure on the Houthis not to break the alliance with Saleh, deeming the movement too weak to stand alone (al-Madhaji, personal interview, 2019). In early August 2016, the Houthi-Saleh alliance established a new political body, the Supreme Political Council, appointing Saleh al-Samad its president. This appeared to consolidate their alliance. However, the SRC led by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi remained operative.

### **Prolonged War - Ceasefires, Peace Talks, Humanitarian Aid, 2016-2019**

By the end of August 2016, Saleh sought Russia's endorsement of the SPC, claiming to be ready to open Yemen's strategic facilities to Moscow in the fight against terrorism. A Houthi delegation visited Iraq led by Muhammad Abdulsalam and including Mahdi al-Mashat, an in-law of the Houthi family and member of Ansarullah's political office. According to a UN Panel of Experts report, al-Mashat headed the Houthi negotiating team during 2015 and 2016 but kept a low profile preferring to work behind the scenes. Described as "an impulsive hardliner," he was the actual decision maker with direct access to Abdulmalik al-Houthi (UNPoE, 2017, p. 12). On September 1, Iraqi Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi recognized the SPC as "representative of Yemen," pointing out that Daesh and al-Qaeda were the "real danger" (El-Bar, 2016).

After leaving Iraq, the Houthi delegation was forced to stay in Oman because Saudi Arabia forbade its return to Sanaa. In Muscat, talks took place around a new peace plan set out by US Secretary of State John Kerry. In October, a Saudi airstrike targeted a funeral in Sanaa that was attended by many prominent Houthi and GPC leaders. According to GPC sources, Kerry's plan, officially presented in November, amounted to US compensation for this tragic Saudi mistake (Anonymous 5, personal interview, 2019). Kerry's efforts were positively received by the Houthi-Saleh alliance. Muhammad al-Bukhaiti, deputy head of Ansarullah's Foreign Relations, called for a national unity government, welcoming Riyadh's intention to stop the war (Ghobari, 2016). However, because Hadi was by-passed by Kerry's diplomatic initiative, he became a spoiler and helped doom the Kerry plan to failure.

During the same month November 2016, the GPC celebrated the election of US president Donald Trump, and Saleh offered his congratulations. Saleh and other GPC officials expected Trump could end US support of the Saudi-led coalition, due to his ties with Russia and contacts with prominent Saudis (Baron & Salisbury, 2016). In December, with the aim to raise international awareness of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, a Houthi delegation was officially received in Beijing and Moscow. It met the deputy foreign minister of the Russian Federation, Mikhail Bogdanov, and welcomed the "Russian approach" (Al Manar, 2016).

During the first months of 2017, tensions mounted between the Houthis and the UN envoy Ould Cheikh. At the end of May, the latter's convoy came under attack while approaching Sanaa. Muhammad al-Bukhaiti later interpreted the attack as a warning to the envoy not to enter the capital due to his "biased approach" (Dewan, 2017). After meeting the envoy, Muhammad Abdulsalam accused the UN of "doing nothing" except facilitating the embargo and transferring the Central Bank of Yemen from Sanaa to Aden. At the beginning of June, and again on July 17, he officially asked the UN to sack and replace Ould Cheikh (Dewan, 2017).

In May 2017, the Houthis acquired the technology to strike Riyadh and Yanbu with Burkan 2-H medium-range ballistic missiles, a version of the Iranian Qiam-1 (Knights, 2018, p. 20). During the summer, after a Saudi ARAMCO oil refinery was targeted, Abdulmalik al-Houthi launched a new campaign called 'After Riyadh' (*ma ba'd al-Riyadh*). In a broadcast speech, he addressed Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrullah to confirm the Yemeni people's readiness to join the Lebanese party's fight against Israel. In the same speech, he warned the UAE that Dubai's strategic facilities were within the range of Borkan-2H missiles. It was around this time that the Houthi-Saleh alliance started collapsing in Sanaa. Riyadh welcomed the internal tensions and, between June and July, the GPC managed to reopen communications with Saudi Arabia (Anonymous 1, personal interview, 2019), while the UAE had long maintained a positive relationship with Saleh's party via Ahmed Ali in Dubai.

Inside Sanaa, as Houthis rapidly extended their grip over state institutions, GPC leaders started criticizing them in public. In August 2017, tensions within the alliance peaked when Saleh organized a large public celebration of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GPC's formation. By the end of November, armed clashes erupted on the streets of Sanaa. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia's attitude to the Houthis became more hostile after a Houthi ballistic exploded near Riyadh on November 4, a few days before Trump's visit to the kingdom. In retaliation, the GCC coalition imposed an even tighter blockade on al-Hodeida leading to a further exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis.

On December 2, 2017, Saleh declared his intention to "turn the page" and find an agreement with Saudi Arabia. Two days later, he was brutally killed by the Houthis. His assassination dramatically changed the balance of power within the SPC. Ansarullah responded by dispatching a delegation in January 2018 to visit Muscat, Berlin, Tunis, Istanbul and Moscow. Its aim, according to Abdulmalik al-Ijri, an in-law of the Houthis and member of Ansarullah's political office, was to end Yemen's isolation and highlight Yemen's political and humanitarian situation (Al Mashad Al Yemeni, 2018). Al-Ijri soon joined Muhammad Abdulsalam as the face of the movement abroad (al-Madhaji, personal interview, 2019). Hussain al-Izzi was appointed deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.

On February 10, 2018, Muhammad Abdulsalam met in Tehran with Iran's Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif, who called for an immediate halt to the war. Acting separately on behalf of the SRC, Muhammad Ali al-Houthi presented a document to the newly-appointed UN envoy Martin Griffiths, outlining a four-part peace plan. The document blamed the UN Security Council for failing to prevent "daily massacres against citizens in Yemen," deeming the UN legally and morally responsible for any further deterioration of the humanitarian crisis. Al-Houthi did not spare the former UN envoy Ould Cheikh one last caustic jab, accusing him of serving Saudi and American interests, while being "a nightmare for the Yemeni people" (Nord, 2018). In the same month, the UN Panel of Experts presented substantial evidence of Iran's non-compliance with resolution 2216, holding Tehran responsible for not preventing the "direct or indirect" supply of missiles, storage tanks and drones to the Houthi-Saleh alliance (UNPoE, 2018, p. 2). On February 26, the US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley called for a Security Council vote condemning Iran, but Russia vetoed the resolution.

On April 23, 2018, President Saleh al-Samad was killed in an airstrike on Yemeni territory. The Houthis blamed the US and Saudi Arabia for his "assassination." In the same month,



the pro-UAE National Resistance Forces, led by Saleh's nephew Tareq, advanced along the Red Sea coast with southern forces in a UAE-planned operation aimed at seizing the Red Sea port city of al-Hodeida. With the backing of the international community, UN envoy Griffiths opposed the operation because it would "take peace off the table." At the end of June, the Houthis indicated for the first time that they would agree to withdraw from al-Hodeida and hand it over to UN control.

As the situation in al-Hodeida deteriorated over the summer of 2018, the Houthis escalated their military and verbal attacks against the UAE. Back in April 2018, Muhammad Ali al-Houthi sided with Somalia in a dispute with the Emirates, and in July, Abu Dhabi's international airport was attacked by a Houthi drone. Concurrently, Houthi leaders strengthened their relationship with regional Shiite partners. In June, Muhammad al-Qibli led a Houthi delegation to Iraq, seeking logistical support and military training from Wad Allah and al-Hashd. There were claims about the arrival of Hashd battalions in Yemen ([Al Asimah](#), 2018). In August, Muhammad Abdulsalam led the first official Houthi delegation to meet with Hassan Nasrullah in Lebanon. The delegation included al-Ijri and Ibrahim al-Daylami, Ansarullah's representative in Lebanon and director of al-Masirah television.

In September 2018, a renewed attempt to hold UN-sponsored peace talks in Geneva collapsed when the Houthi delegation did not turn up. Abdulmalik al-Houthi accused the international community of failing to guarantee the delegation's return to Sanaa and facilitate the evacuation of wounded fighters for medical treatment in Oman. According to a Houthi source, despite the setback the Houthis appreciated Martin Griffiths' efforts which in their view enhanced the SPC's international legitimacy (Anonymous 3, personal interview, 2019).

During the fall of 2018, Muhammad Abdulsalam met in Iran with Hussain Jaber An-sari, the Foreign Minister's special assistant for political affairs. The encounter signaled Iran's willingness to support peace talks to end the Yemen crisis. Meanwhile, Griffiths planned a new round of peace talks in Sweden. At the beginning of December in a clear gesture to the Houthis, a UN-chartered plane evacuated 50 wounded Houthi militants to Muscat. Houthi leaders fully understood the value of this confidence-building measure. At Griffiths' request, members of the GPC were included in the SPC delegation that arrived in Stockholm on December 6, although former Foreign Affairs Minister Abu Bakr al-Qirbi was removed – a testimony to the GPC's weakness in Houthi-controlled Sanaa. On December 13, a "milestone" agreement was reached, including a prisoner swap, a mutual redeployment of forces from al-Hodeida, Salif, and Ras Issa ports, and a statement of understanding on Taiz.

## Conclusions

The temporary "marriage of convenience" between Saleh and the Houthis was inevitably resolved in favor of one of the two players. In 2014, Saleh pushed for the takeover of Sanaa to regain political influence and take revenge on his former allies, Hadi and Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar. To this end, he empowered the Houthis by giving them access to GPC patronage networks, as well as political and military assets, while attempting on his own to gain leverage over foreign and domestic actors. When the Saudis threatened war he tried to avoid it because he believed it would be to the advantage of Houthis who "developed in war and died in peace." The Saudis, however, mistrusted Saleh as "a traitor and enemy" (VS18 1, personal interview, 2019).

By 2017, Saleh found himself surrounded by the Houthis at a local level and isolated at an international level. According to GPC sources, he believed that coalition airstrikes – by killing innocent civilians and worsening the humanitarian crisis – played to the Houthis' advantage. As GPC brokers of Saleh pursued negotiations with Riyadh, Saleh calculated that it was necessary to provoke conflict with the Houthis in Sanaa, aiming to weaken and possibly destroy their base of popular support. As conflicts increased through the fall of 2017, he agreed to take part in a joint attack against Houthi forces in December. He ultimately lost his life in

the Sanaa street battles because the Saudis failed to back him. They believed that Saleh's death would lead to the demise of the Houthis (VS18 1, personal interview, 2019).

For their part, the Houthis forged a rebel movement inspired by the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Yet Iran's investment in Houthi rebels was marginal until the youth uprising in 2011 (Terrill, 2014). As Yemeni youth revolted, Houthi leaders sought to coopt liberal activists and civic leaders in order to create a facade of political legitimacy for a new party called Ansarullah. However, they never turned Ansarullah into a functioning political party. Instead, they sought to exploit Saleh's GPC networks in order to infiltrate state institutions in the national capital and outlying provinces where they previously had no power base. Conscious of their political weakness and aware of their narrow power base in Saada province, they always favored military means to extend their influence in Yemen, as they did in February 2015 when they attempted to seize control of Aden. After the start of Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in late March 2015, Houthi leaders sought to exploit the humanitarian crisis resulting from foreign aggression in order to gain sympathy and build support across all levels, local, regional, and global.

Between the end of 2014 and the Kuwait peace talks in 2016, Houthi leaders maintained a dialogue with Saudi Arabia, while blaming the US for the war. In this period, they had three aims: securing the northern border; isolating President Hadi's government; and excluding the Saudi-led coalition from Yemen's internal war. As they failed to achieve these aims, they increasingly built up their connections with regional Shiite allies. As a result, Iranian involvement in the Yemen crisis became increasingly more explicit. Despite receiving new missile technologies in 2017 that made it possible to target Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, Houthi leaders were badly weakened by military setbacks in al-Hodeida during 2018. As a result, they acquiesced to new peace talks in Sweden.

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