

Following the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism
Hearing on “The Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen: Addressing Current Political and Humanitarian
Challenges”

Questions for the Record

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From Representative Steve Watkins

1. My question is for Katherine Zimmerman, thank you for being here today, based on your research, what would you say is the true motive for Iran backing the Houthis, what are they gaining from this partnership? How can we and our allies best exert leverage to end or at least diminish support for the Houthis?

Iran’s support for the al Houthi movement in Yemen is part of its effort to expand its regional influence through the cultivation of what the Iranians call the “Axis of Resistance.” The Axis of Resistance is an informal Iranian-led alliance of state and non-state actors generally opposed to Western and Israeli influence in the Middle East, including America’s Arab partners. Members include Iran, Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, and some Iraqi Shia militias. Iranian officials now list the al Houthi movement among other partners, and al Houthi delegations have met regularly with others within the Axis of Resistance. Iran leverages this alliance to pursue its regional objectives, which include expelling the United States from the Middle East and establishing Iranian regional hegemony.

A limited Iranian investment in Yemen has yielded outsized influence on the Arabian Peninsula and in the Red Sea for Iran. Iran has provided the al Houthis with media, political, diplomatic, materiel, and humanitarian support. Critically, Iran has transferred asymmetric military capabilities to the al Houthis that have enabled them to threaten Riyadh and possibly Abu Dhabi, as well as to disrupt commercial naval traffic in the Red Sea. Iran has also built indigenous capacity within Yemen to produce improvised explosive devices (IED) that may very likely challenge Yemeni

and coalition advances against the al Houthis in the coming phases of the civil war.¹ Iran has used the threat from the al Houthis to pull Saudi focus from other theaters such as Syria back to Yemen, and to distract from Iranian gains elsewhere in the region. It is far from a given, however, that the al Houthis respond to commands from Tehran.

The al Houthi movement is not under Iranian control yet. It does not take orders from Tehran and the al Houthi movement will not take actions in Iran's interest that run against its own. The al Houthis probably remain more important to Iran than Iran is to the al Houthis. The al Houthi movement itself is not a monolith, and many of the supporters who joined the al Houthis over the course of the civil war most likely would reject Iran under the right conditions. It is not clear where the core al Houthi leadership stands on the Iran question. Separating the al Houthis from Iran will grow increasingly more difficult as time passes, but it is not impossible.

Interdicting the flow of Iranian materiel into Yemen could limit the al Houthis' asymmetrical attack capabilities, though it would not address them fully. The longer-range ballistic missile attacks from Yemen into Saudi Arabia used Iranian-sourced weapons. Iran has also provided unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to the al Houthis, and it is not clear that these can be produced in Yemen. But the al Houthis should be able to sustain shorter-range missile attacks, naval attacks, and landmine and IED attacks without Iranian support. These attacks are critical to the al Houthis' defense in Yemen.

A US-led diplomatic effort to resolve the underlying conflicts in the civil war could be a starting place to reduce the al Houthis' relationship with Iran. Wartime requirements will continue to drive the al Houthi movement toward Iran. The al Houthis (and many of Yemen's southerners) reject the January 2014 outcomes of the Yemeni National Dialogue Conference (NDC) because the process and political maneuvering within the conference allowed Yemen's political elite to paint a veneer of reform over the power structures that support elite interests. Critically, the NDC failed to produce an acceptable solution to how the Yemeni government would decentralize and how national resources would be distributed. The proposed six-region solution, and the manner by which this solution was reached, delegitimized the NDC process for some members of the opposition, including the al Houthis.² Current US statements continue to call for Yemenis to respect the outcomes of the NDC, which ignores the protests of the al Houthis and Yemen's Southern Movement (al Hirak) against these outcomes. The current UN-led efforts do not seek to resolve this issue, either, leaving it unresolved. The US and partners might recognize the failures of the NDC to address this issue and work to produce a solution acceptable to all Yemenis.

The US might also encourage partners to develop or restore relationships with individuals who have chosen to support the al Houthis politically during the civil war but who might not believe in the entirety of the al Houthis' efforts. The al Houthi adherents might include members of the former ruling party still in northern Yemen and northern-based families and tribes who have calculated that their political prospects and futures were better with the al Houthis than with the

loose-knit coalition opposing the al Houthis. Splintering the al Houthi movement in this fashion could begin to right-size the al Houthi influence in Yemen. Reducing the al Houthis' strengths would increase the prospects of an acceptable negotiated settlement to the war and political resolution in Yemen.

¹ Conflict Armament Research, "Mines and IEDs Employed by Houthi Forces on Yemen's West Coast," September 2018, <http://www.conflictarm.com/dispatches/mines-and-ieds-employed-by-houthi-forces-on-yemens-west-coast/>.

² For reference, see Katherine Zimmerman, *Yemen's Pivotal Moment*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, February 12, 2014, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/yemens-pivotal-moment>.