

# Houthis' Shifts within the Retreating Axis of Resistance

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## introduction

Regional developments since October 2023 have marked a turning point for the so-called “Axis of Resistance,” placing it and its components under a severe test. The Israeli-American war on Iran, the collapse of the Assad regime, and the wars in Gaza and Lebanon collectively exposed the limits of the axis, weakened it, and redefined the roles of its members. While Hezbollah and Iran appeared weakened, and other actors struggled to demonstrate effectiveness in their confrontations with Israel, the Houthis stood out as a notable exception. Not only were they among the least affected, but they also emerged as the most active, adaptive, and assertive actor within the bloc.

This analysis examines the implications of these shifts for the Houthis' relationship with their allies in the Axis of Resistance and considers how this relationship might develop in the future.

## Impact of Regional Developments on the Axis of Resistance

The post–October 7, 2023 landscape has reshaped Houthi relations with the Axis of Resistance in contradictory ways. On one hand, it has reinforced solidarity and cooperation; on the other, it has introduced confusion and friction. These dynamics have played out both directly and indirectly, producing several notable consequences.

## Positioning the Houthis as a central actor

Recent upheavals have redefined the Houthis' place within the axis. While the bloc as a whole suffered unprecedented setbacks that weakened nearly all of its members, the Houthis emerged as the only faction perceived as relatively successful. This elevated them from being viewed as Iran's local ally to a pivotal partner and aspiring regional actor. Their stronger position has made them more eager to demonstrate value and reliability to allies, but also more assertive in asserting independence and raising expectations.



## Disruption of coordination mechanisms

The targeted killings of key figures—from Qassem Soleimani in 2020 to senior Hezbollah commanders—have eroded the axis's ability to coordinate. The Quds Force and Hezbollah once played central roles in organizing and equipping proxy groups, but Ismail Qaani, Soleimani's successor, has struggled to manage the complex networks previously overseen by his predecessor.

### Decline in enthusiasm and prospects for cooperation

The series of confrontations faced by the axis have revealed serious operational shortcomings and undermined the doctrine of a “unified front.” These disappointing outcomes translated into political setbacks and psychological defeats, eroding members' confidence in the bloc's future and weakening prospects for sustained cooperation with the Houthis.

## Heightened fears of targeting and infiltration

The clashes with Israel exposed alarming intelligence and security vulnerabilities, underscoring Israel's superiority in this domain. These developments fuelled widespread fears within the axis of potential breaches and heightened concerns about becoming targets of similar strikes. Iran, in particular, has grown more cautious about exposing its allies to direct confrontation—an approach that helps explain the Houthis' limited engagement alongside Tehran against Israel and the United States.

## Sharpened divergence in motives and considerations

While the axis is bound by shared ideological and political commitments, its members are equally shaped by distinct national and local priorities. These differences have, at times, driven actors to pursue strategies that diverge from the bloc's collective interests. Such divergences have become increasingly visible, especially in the cases of Hezbollah and Iranian-aligned Iraqi factions, thereby reducing the scope of operational cooperation with the Houthis.

## The Houthis' evolving relationship with the Axis of Resistance

The regional upheavals since October 2023 have both reinforced and tested the Houthis' ties with their allies. Initially, these shifts strengthened cooperation. According to the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen (September 2023–July 2024), the Houthis transformed from a relatively localized armed group into a military organization with operational capacities extending beyond their areas of control. They also acquired advanced weapons not previously in their possession as of September 2022. The report highlighted unprecedented deliveries of military equipment, technological assistance, and financial support from Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraqi factions. At the media level, coordination has been robust, with allied outlets actively amplifying Houthi narratives, activities, and objectives.

However, since at least September 2024, strains have surfaced. Certain aspects of cooperation have encountered obstacles, with particularly notable setbacks in the operational domain. These challenges suggest that while the Houthis' partnership with the Axis of Resistance remains significant, it is increasingly marked by tension, selective engagement, and recalibrated expectations.

### 1. Relations with Iran :Strengthening Mutual dependency

Iran has long been the Houthis' principal sponsor and strategic backer. The latest regional shifts have given both sides new incentives to strengthen this partnership. Iran's reliance on the Houthis has grown as its regional influence weakened following Hezbollah's military setbacks and the collapse of the Assad regime. Keen to preserve its role as a regional powerbroker, Tehran has increasingly leaned on the Houthis as its most resilient and adaptable proxy.

For their part, the Houthis' Mutual dependency on Iran has also deepened, particularly for military support, after positioning themselves against Israel and the broader international community. This dynamic has reflected into expanded assistance. In addition to the unprecedented support documented by the UN Panel of Experts, the first half of 2025 witnessed a notable surge in intercepted Iranian arms shipments bound for Yemen. Another indicator of stepped-up support came in late June, when the U.S. Treasury Department announced what it described as its largest-ever action against individuals, firms, and vessels involved in moving large volumes of smuggled Iranian oil, the proceeds of which were used to finance Houthi operations.

The Houthis' resumption of attacks on Red Sea shipping further illustrates the persistence of intelligence sharing, reflected in the detailed information they revealed about the two vessels they claimed to have sunk.

## 2. Relations with Hezbollah

The Houthis have long maintained close cooperation with Hezbollah, especially in military matters. The party played a pivotal role in enhancing Houthi capabilities, overseeing their armament and training, and supporting the development of their decision-making structures, operational planning, and propaganda apparatus.

However, Hezbollah's capacity to sustain this level of support has diminished following its military defeat and heavy losses, including the deaths of senior operatives such as Basel Shukr and Mohammad Sarour, who had overseen Houthi drone and missile programs. Financial strains have left the party unable to pay salaries and compensation to its war-affected constituents, while internal disarray and shrinking political influence in Lebanon have compounded its troubles. The result has been a sharp decline in Hezbollah's ability to provide military assistance to the Houthis.

Non-military cooperation has also been affected, though to a lesser degree. Hezbollah still contributes through its financial and commercial networks, its external connections, and its wide-ranging expertise. The Houthis continue to maintain an office in Beirut, and their satellite channels—Al-Masirah and Al-Sahat—continue to operate from Lebanese territory.

## 3. Relations with Iran-Aligned Iraqi Groups

The UN Panel of Experts has underscored the Houthis' extensive ties with Iranian-backed Iraqi factions<sup>1</sup>, noting that these groups have been sending fighters and advisers to Yemen since 2015, while also supplying the Houthis with weapons and financial donations. In addition to donations, these factions provide subsidized fuel shipments. The Houthis also benefit from their involvement in currency smuggling networks and the illicit trade of Iraqi and Iranian oil. In turn, it appears the Iraqi factions have drawn upon the Houthis' growing reservoir of battlefield experience.

Following October 2023, the relationship entered a new phase. On May 23, 2024, the Houthi leader announced joint military coordination with Iraqi factions. On June 6, 2024, the Houthis claimed two joint operations against Israel, with a similar announcement repeated in early December 2024. Reports also pointed to Houthi presence in some Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) camps, while Houthi units previously deployed in Syria relocated to Iraq after the collapse of the Assad regime.

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<sup>1</sup> It includes the Hezbollah Brigades, the al-Nujaba Brigades, the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades, the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Organization, and the Waad al-Haq Brigades..

Yet this cooperation soon encountered mounting challenges. The Iraqi factions came under both domestic and international pressure to curtail their support for the Houthis and shut down their offices in Iraq. These pressures were driven by fears that such ties could expose Iraq to retaliatory strikes. Ironically, Iran itself reportedly pressed for the closure of Houthi offices. The Iraqi government, under heavy U.S. pressure, claimed that it had already curtailed many Houthi activities.

As a result, operational collaboration between the Houthis and the Iraqi factions has stalled, if not declined. No further joint operations have been announced since December 2024, and none of the factions has provided tangible support to the Houthis in their ongoing confrontations with Israel or the United States. While some issued public statements of solidarity, these were never reflected into action on the ground.

#### 4. Relations with Hamas

The Houthis' ties with Hamas are more opportunistic than genuine, shaped by religious affinity and political expediency. The relationship is relatively recent<sup>2</sup>, dating back to around March 2020, with the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023 marking a significant turning point. The Houthis emphasize their close coordination with Hamas, though Iran appears to play a central role in facilitating and managing this channel.

There are indications that Hamas may have benefited from Houthi-supervised financial support, primarily through popular donations. However, there is no evidence of direct military cooperation, weapons supply, or joint operations on the ground.

In sum, the Houthis maintain robust relationships across various levels with nearly all members of the Axis of Resistance, though each relationship carries its own limitations and complexities. Their partnerships are underpinned not only by ideological affinity but also by intricate networks of shared economic ventures, funding mechanisms, and smuggling operations. These connections enable the Houthis to generate and launder significant resources, facilitate trade and arms transfers, and acquire advanced technology—all while helping their allies circumvent and weaken the impact of international sanctions.

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<sup>2</sup> With the launch of Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen in 2015, Hamas issued a statement affirming its support for the legitimate government.

## Prospects of the Relationship :Between Houthi Expansion and Ally Decline

The Houthis' ties with the Axis of Resistance have thus far demonstrated resilience and adaptability under shifting pressures. Shared ideology, interdependent networks of interest, and common external threats continue to anchor these relationships. Yet, since late 2023, fast-moving developments have introduced new political and security imperatives that could push these alliances into uncharted territory. The key question is whether these bonds will withstand and adapt to the pressures ahead—or whether these shifts will force a reconfiguration of the relationship.

### 1. The Future of the Relationship in Context of Iran's Position and Potential Shifts

Iran remains the cornerstone of the Axis of Resistance, and any internal change or alteration in its external relations inevitably reverberates across its ties with the Houthis. It is likely that Tehran will seek to deepen its partnership with the Houthis, who have increasingly become its most effective and enduring proxy. However, Iran now faces critical strategic choices.

The outcome of anticipated negotiations with the United States and Western powers—expected to address its military programs and regional policies—will be decisive. A failure or breakdown of these talks could heighten the risk of renewed conflict with Iran. Regardless of the outcome, restrictions on its military and regional posture appear likely, which may in turn affect the scope of its support for the Houthis .

If Tehran scales back its overt support for the group, it would likely represent a tactical adjustment rather than a strategic shift. Covert support channels would almost certainly persist, evolving into more sophisticated and discreet forms, guided by a flexible framework that enables Iran to navigate changing pressures and constraints

### 2 .The Potential Fragmentation of Axis Components and Its Impact

Across the Axis of Resistance, the Houthis stand out as the exception to a broader trend of weakening capacities and diminishing effectiveness among other members.

Hezbollah is facing human and military attrition, alongside mounting domestic and international demands for its disarmament. Until Hezbollah recovers, it is unlikely to resume the strategic support it once provided to the Houthis—and such a recovery appears improbable in the near term .

Iraqi armed groups are under simultaneous pressure from Baghdad's government, rival political forces, the Shiite religious authority in Najaf, and the United States. These pressures target not only their activities but also their very cohesion. The intensity of these challenges may prove overwhelming, and Iran itself could abandon these groups if their dissolution becomes a condition for preserving its influence in Iraq.



Hamas, meanwhile, is politically and militarily depleted. The prospect of its disarmament, leadership displacement, or political neutralization looms large amid Israel's concerted drive to dismantle its structures.

In this shifting environment, it is plausible that cadres and military expertise from Hezbollah or Hamas may relocate to Yemen. Such a development would benefit the Houthis, positioning them for a more central role within the resistance framework. At the same time, however, it would alter the nature of their alliances, complicate their strategic considerations and impose new burdens. These dynamics could push the group into roles that exceed its capacities or conflict with its local and regional priorities.

### **3. The Impact of the Yemeni Factor on the Relationship**

Although the Houthis currently project relative strength, developments within Yemen continue to shape the trajectory of their ties with regional allies. International attention to the Yemeni conflict is likely to resurface—particularly if the war in Gaza subsides and no new flashpoints emerge elsewhere in the Middle East. In such a scenario, renewed diplomatic efforts to resolve the Yemeni crisis could place the Houthis under increasing pressure to engage in peace negotiations, but under new conditions. These conditions would reflect the altered regional landscape and the weakened position of the Axis of Resistance.

At that point, the Houthis would face a delicate balancing act: navigating the demands of their alignment with the Axis against the incentives of international recognition and participation in a settlement framework. Such arrangements may require them to scale back—or at least soften—their overt ties with regional allies.

If, however, hostilities escalate between the Houthis and either Israel or the United States—a plausible prospect given their resumption of attacks on shipping lanes—the group could find itself overstretched. If their allies hesitate or fail to provide support, the resulting political and psychological setback could prompt the Houthis to reconsider their position within the Axis and strengthen their pursuit of autonomy.

### **4. Future Trajectories**

Despite the multiple challenges facing the Axis of Resistance, the Houthis' relationship with its partners appears headed into a new phase of adaptation and reconfiguration. This phase is likely to see a redefinition of roles, with the Houthis positioned at the core.



Mutual dependency remains a powerful driver: the Houthis need weapons and external support, while the Axis requires a resilient actor capable of sustaining pressure. This dynamic will persist even if Iran adopts a more cautious or discreet approach in response to external pressures.

The enduring threat posed by Israel and the United States also provides both sides with a practical rationale to deepen intelligence and deterrence cooperation. Moreover, the transfer of senior figures or military expertise from Hezbollah or Hamas to Yemen—whether political or operational—could deliver important political, tactical, and technical benefits to the Houthis, albeit accompanied by significant burdens.

At the same time, a scenario in which the Houthis seek greater independence cannot be dismissed. If the group perceives its allies as unable to protect its position in critical moments of need, it may seek to loosen explicit commitments to the Axis while maintaining channels of coordination and shared interests.

Ultimately, the future shape of the Houthis' alliances will be determined by two key factors: the persistence and scale of external threats, and Iran's capacity to sustain its role as the primary patron of the Axis. The Houthis' reliance on advanced weaponry, funding, and transnational support networks makes it difficult for them to sever ties with Tehran. The relationship is not grounded solely in ideological affinity, but in strategic imperatives and political pragmatism. As long as the Iranian regime endures, the partnership will persist—albeit with adjustments to form and emphasis. Even if Iran's regional position weakens, it is likely to rebuild its network around the Houthis and continue supporting them to the extent its circumstances allow.

In conclusion, the Houthis' relationships with the various components of the Axis of Resistance remain subject to multiple possible scenarios, shaped by a complex interplay of evolving factors. Each scenario would, in turn, recalibrate the group's overall position within the Axis, creating a matrix of overlapping and uncertain outcomes



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