

## Position Paper

# The Houthis: Expanding Areas of Influence through Quick Strikes

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A few months from the start of the youth revolution in Yemen, the Houthis entered into bloody military clashes in more than one region. Their opponents regarded it as an attempt to expand and impose their presence by military power. The Houthis, however, considered it self-defense and proof of their legitimate right to exist and to have freedom of belief. These clashes coincided with the group's adoption of the option to revolt against the political regime. What sets them apart from the other forces of revolution in Yemen is rejection of the Gulf Initiative and the fact that they are seeking to form a third party, demanding the departure of both the regime and the opposition. What are the motives of the Houthis? What is the extent of their ability to put more obstacles and hinder the successful implementation of the Initiative and the stability of the situation in the next phase?

## Quick strikes

Soon after the start of the youth revolution in February 2011, the Houthis announced to join it, in their quest to overthrow the same regime they had fought in six successive wars. They sought to get out of the isolation imposed on them, hoping to break the stereotype describing them as a rebel group, and gain more popular support domestically. Besides, they do not want to allow for other forces to monopolise the post-regime arrangements.

However, the Houthis' calculations apparently changed after the announcement by Major General Ali Mohsen, Commander of the First Armored Fleet, to joining the revolution; a person they see as primarily responsible for the wars waged against them. Also, the emergence of the Reform Party (Muslim Brotherhood) and the sons of Sheikh Ahmar, their traditional rivals, are all major forces leading the revolution and potential heirs to the ruling regime.

Out of fear that these three forces would control power in the post-Saleh era, the Houthis adopted the strategy of quick strikes to achieve quick gains and create a new reality on the ground, taking advantage of the mutual exhaustion of their opponents; the regime and the opposition. After the fall of the province of Saada in their hands in the early days of the revolution, where they maintained a kind of self-rule and changed the curriculum in public schools, their eyes turned to the neighbouring al-Jawf province, where they had bloody military confrontations with the tribes loyal to the Reform Party over the control of the centers of power, before a temporary agreement was reached and stopped its progress. Then later, they sought to take advantage of the stalemate between the Revolution and the political regime, while the major powers were squabbling among themselves, and they tried expanding their military force in the provinces of Amran, Hijjah and Mahweet. Without the strong resistance by the tribes in these areas, supported and abetted by internal and external forces of neighbours, the Houthis took over these regions, and they were on the verge of realizing their dream of getting access to the sea on the shore of the Red Sea.

The Houthis have been imposing an intensified siege on a group of Salafis in the region of Damaj, in the province of Saada, for about two months and they have engaged them in military clashes almost daily, in a conflict that seems not be subject to peaceful settlement so far and threatens to slide into a sectarian war that might expand to other areas in Yemen.

Analysts interpreted the Houthis' steps towards expansion on the ground at this time as an attempt to gain new cards in preparation for the post-Saleh era. By making their presence a reality, the Houthis made it difficult for their opponents, internal and external forces alike, to have any alternative but to accept them and deal with them. They (the Houthis) aim – according to reports by the Dimensions Center for Studies and Research – to be, in the short run, the first power in those areas, and to force the political forces to accept the system of quotas, as is happening in Lebanon. In the event the State collapses, they will be able to declare self-rule in the areas they control, to include at a later stage the traditional areas of influence of the Zaidi sect. That will be the starting

point from which they might move later on to control the rest of the Northern provinces in a repeat of earlier historical models.

Some regional powers may try to take advantage of the Houthis expansion, in anticipation of what could come out of the latest developments in Syria, the implications of U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the growing tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran; it is likely that Tehran seeks to hold the Houthis cards to put pressure on the Kingdom and surround it with Shiite entities from Iraq to the north and east in the Eastern Province, Kuwait and Bahrain, as well as from Yemen in the south. Thus, Iran would accumulate a huge number of pressure cards, for both its relationship with Saudi Arabia and with the United States of America.

## **Out of the Game**

The Houthis announced their rejection of the Gulf Initiative and implicitly do not acknowledge the legitimacy of the new interim government thereof. The reasons given are that the Initiative represents a betrayal of the blood of the martyrs and the wounded, disregard for the sacrifices of the Yemeni people and a painful stab at the back of the rebels who have endured all kinds of suffering; imprisonment, torture and murder, over the past months. However, the unnamed reason is that the Initiative in fact drove them out of the circle of political influence and placed them outside the transitional arrangements. But opponents say that it is the Houthis who put themselves in this position, first by rejecting the offer to join the Transitional National Assembly that is the representative of the revolution, which is a party to the Initiative. Secondly, they adopted the line of military confrontation with the other forces of the revolution, in more than one place, in an attempt to score rapid gains on the ground.

Analysts are of the view that the Houthis' rejection of the Initiative is due to the fact that signing it and thus coming out of the current stalemate means excluding the option of the war, which will deny them a valuable opportunity to exhaust their opponents in internal fighting and reduces the opportunities of their expansion in the absence of others.

## **A Third Force**

Based on the foregoing, the Houthis will move to influence the arrangements in the post-President Saleh phase by upholding the option of peaceful revolution to give legitimacy to their demands. But at the same time, they will seek to form a third force, by uniting the anti-Initiative forces, rejecting both sides in power and the opposition, and creating a stream against all by adopting the slogan "All Out". They will seek to divide the youth forces between those who are anti- and those who are pro-Initiative, taking advantage of providing President Saleh and his official's guarantees of non-accountability. Deepening this, the rift between the youth and the opposition parties could lead to a clash in the squares between the independent youth and supporters of the Joint Meeting.

The Houthis may alternatively seek to agitate the inherent differences and hostilities between the parties to the Initiative – the regime and the opposition – by playing on the contradictions between them in order to shuffle the cards and impede the implementation of the Initiative. The regime itself may use a tactical move by using the move of the Houthis as a card – as it did earlier – to break up the revolution and disperse its forces.

However, there are obstacles limiting the ability of the Houthis to significantly influence the course of events during the next phase; their limited political and social influence, so far, and the fact that they put their main weight behind the military option, which frightens the revolutionary civil and independent forces against the fact of Houthis project, and its compatibility with the principle of a democratic civil state, which all these forces are seeking to achieve.