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Weaponizing Solidarity?

The Houthis' Path to Global Recognition

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Introduction

Since the Houthi movement first emerged in Yemen in the 1990s, it has undergone a radical transformation from a small political opposition group to a globally known terrorist-designated group engaged in conflict with multiple enemies, both domestic and foreign.

With an estimated 150,000 fighters, control over 70-80% of Yemen's population, and a large arsenal of various missiles, drones, and other heavy weaponry, the Houthis are today a formidable military force. Over the past year, their globally condemned attacks on maritime navigation and ongoing exchange of missile strikes with Israel, which they claim are in solidarity with Palestinians, have turned the Houthis into a key regional player known globally. But what exactly does the world think of them, and is their Palestinian solidarity legitimate, or just a power play?

Here, we'll look at how global and Western perspectives of the Houthis have shifted over the past year, the motives of the militant group, and what their move onto the global stage could signify.

How did the Houthis amass so Much Power?

To understand how the Houthis got to where they are today, it's important to cover some of their background.

After being founded in 1992 by Zaidi religious leader Hussein al-Houthi, the group started to amass followers with their opposition to then-Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and their leader's lectures against economic inequality and corruption. The group became increasingly radicalized and anti-Western in the early 2000s, particularly after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and US drone strikes in Yemen from [2002 to 2003](#), and, taking inspiration from Lebanon's Hezbollah, they rebranded as 'Ansar Allah,' adopting the slogan: "death to the U.S., death to Israel, curse the Jews."

They launched their first armed rebellion in 2004, leading to six years of conflict, then capitalized on the 2011 Arab Spring to expand their influence, before seizing the capital in 2014, triggering the still ongoing civil war, in 2015. A Saudi-led coalition, armed by the West, intervened militarily, launching over 25,000 air raids over seven years, killing at least 15,000 civilians in a conflict that has so far left [377,000 Yemenis](#) dead through direct or indirect causes.

During this time, Western media and human rights organizations began [shining a light](#) on Yemen's humanitarian crisis, indirectly portraying the Houthis as victims of coalition bombings, while Iran was accused of [arming](#) the group. Between 2016 and [2021](#), calls to end arms sales to Saudi Arabia grew, leading to temporary halts by President Obama and again under President Biden, hindering the coalition's efforts to combat the Houthis.¹

Amidst [infighting](#) within the Western political class over how to handle the Houthis while limiting Saudi human rights abuses, the Houthis were [designated](#) a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by President Trump in January 2021 in his last days of office. The designation was quickly [revoked](#), in February, by the newly inaugurated Biden administration to facilitate humanitarian aid delivery, and by April 2022, a UN-sponsored truce was reached, allowing the Houthis to consolidate power, recruit and train more fighters, and expand control.

The Houthis could have used the FTO designation revocation and 2022 truce as an opportunity to normalize relations with the international community and legitimize themselves, but as the world has seen in the past year, they chose conflict. The relative peace they had following the

¹ In August 2024, Washington resumed arms sales to Saudi Arabia after October 7 and the Houthis' involvement in a naval conflict, France 24

truce may have been one of the primary reasons they were able to expand their power to the levels we see today.

A spark lights a fire in the Middle East

Most of the world is by now familiar with the events of October 7, 2023. Iranian-supported Palestinian militant group Hamas launched an incursion into US-backed Israel, killing 1200 of its citizens and taking 240 hostage. That same day, Israel declared war on Gaza, the tiny strip of land Hamas rules over which has been under varying degrees of Israeli occupation since 1967 and a military blockade since 2007. Israel has been laying siege to it ever since.

On October 8, Iran-backed Lebanese militant group Hezbollah began firing rockets over Israel's border, claiming solidarity with the Palestinians. On October 14, acting in line with the 'Axis of Resistance' - an alliance of Iran-backed militant groups - the Houthis declared their support for Hamas' October 7th attack, [threatening](#) to launch missiles at Israel. On the 19th they followed through with these threats, [firing](#) land-attack missiles and drones at Israel.

The Houthis have only escalated their attacks since then, and with their continuous escalations, came global recognition, a mixture of international condemnation and popular support, and the fiery ire of the West.

The Houthis' escalations and rise to fame

With the world's eyes already on the Middle East after October 7, the Houthis were well-positioned to capitalize on the world's sympathy for the Palestinians, portraying themselves as 'defenders of Palestine'. Before that month, most of the world had never heard of them.

On October 31, the Houthis fired ballistic missiles at Israel, [vowing](#) to continue "until the Israeli aggression stops" - and the world started to notice them. Global Google searches for 'Houthis' and 'who are the Houthis' spiked that week to their highest levels since Yemen's civil war broke out. Prior to October, monthly searches for 'Houthis' had only averaged between 10,000 to 100,000 across Western nations – they were now ten times that.

Weaponizing Solidarity? The Houthis' Path to Global Recognition

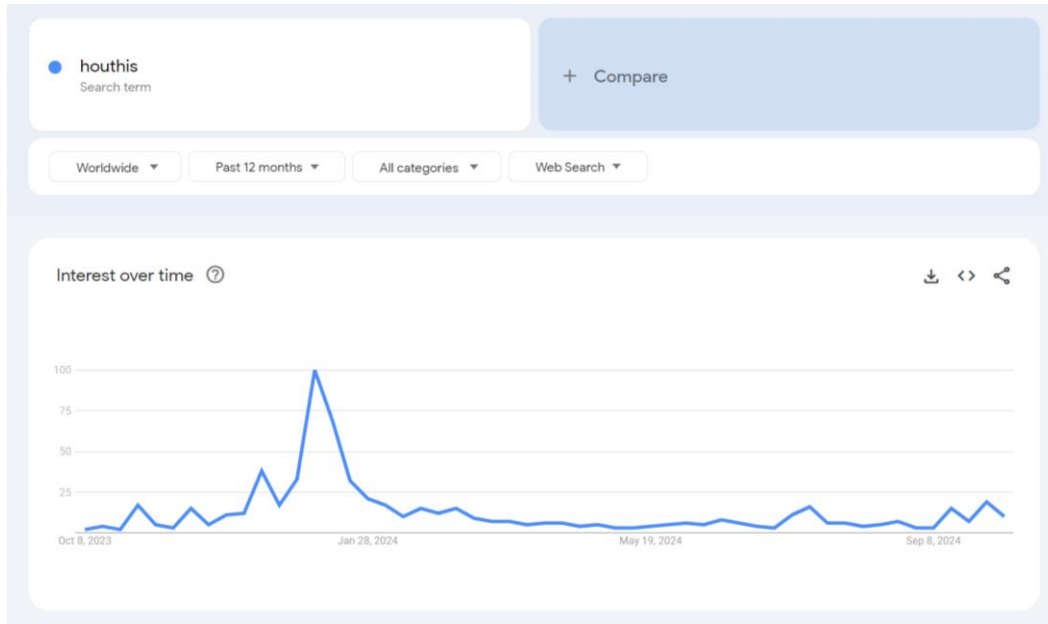


Figure 1 Searches for 'Houthis' since October 8, spiking around January 11

After launching dozens more projectiles, the Houthis escalated their attacks on November 19 when they [hijacked](#) the *Galaxy Leader*, a cargo ship they accused of being Israeli-owned, in the Red Sea. They launched numerous attacks on commercial military ships over the next several weeks, and so, the US [established](#) 'Operation Prosperity Guardian' on December 18 to defend maritime navigation. The next day, 44 countries jointly [condemned](#) the Houthis' aggression. The world's governments were taking notice of the Houthis, they were all over the news, and online searches for their name were now double their previous [2015 peak](#).

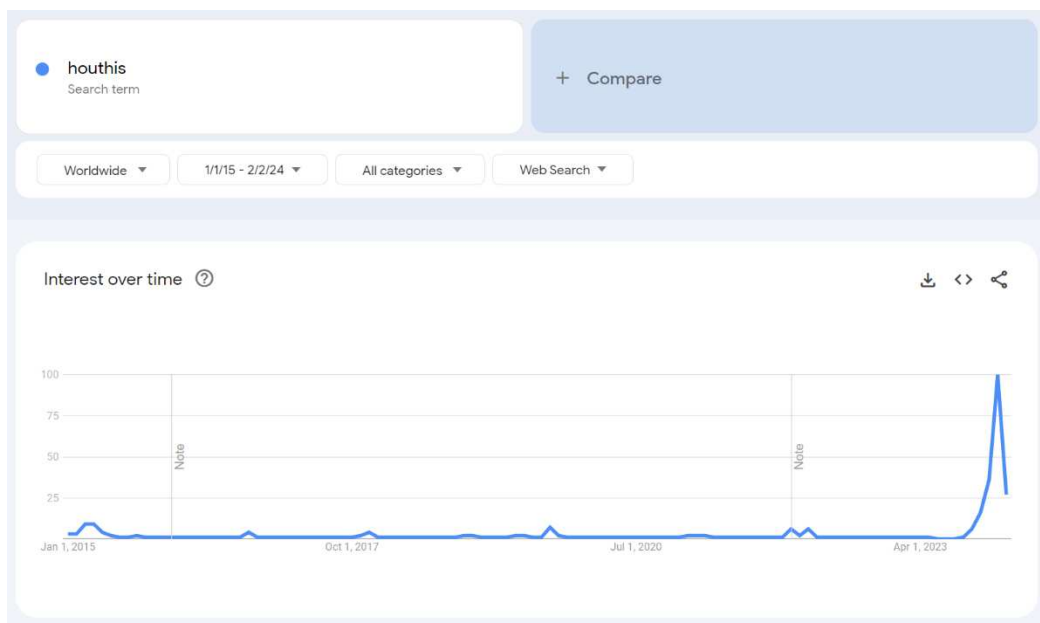


Figure 2 Searches for 'Houthis' from 2015 until February 2024

The US and 13 other nations issued a [final warning](#) to the Houthis on January 3 this year, threatening military action. The Houthis ignored these threats, carrying out more attacks, and on January 11, the US and UK, with support from four other nations, [began](#) 'Operation Poseidon Archer', launching raids on 60 Houthi military sites on day one.

The Houthis were once again [designated](#) a 'Special Designated Global Terrorist Organization' on January 17, and that month, searches for 'Houthis' were over 11 times higher than at the onset of their civil war. The term was now averaging 1 million to 10 million searches per month, a 9,900% year-on-year increase. The Houthis had become a household name, listed as official enemies of Western governments, and known by millions across the world.

As of October 7 this year, according to Houthi leader Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, the group has attacked 193 alleged Israeli, UK, and US ships so far in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, the US and UK have launched 774 strikes on Yemen, he says. As these attacks have escalated, so too has the Houthis' prominence.

The Houthis' social media strategy

There's no question that Western governments, with their terrorist designation and condemnations, view the Houthis negatively. Established Western media outlets often depicted the Houthis simply as terrorists, though [some](#) were [critical](#) of the designation and strikes. However, on social media, there has been widespread support for the Houthis' escalation in many parts of the world.

One of the earliest Houthi topics to circulate and perhaps the most bizarre, was in January, when 19-year-old Yemeni Rashid Al-Haddad, nicknamed the "hot Houthi" for his viral videos supporting Palestine and showing the 'pirate' life aboard the hijacked Galaxy Leader, became a ["social media sensation."](#) according to [France24 News](#). Though this was one isolated incident, it may be the first example of Western audiences glamorizing and showing adoration for someone affiliated with a designated terrorist group and points to a potential disconnect between popular opinion and the official stances of those in power.

Meanwhile, the hashtag #Houthis has been used on tens of thousands of posts on Instagram and TikTok, while the X accounts for the 'Yemeni Armed Forces' and its spokesperson Yahya Sarea now boast 200,000 and [42,000 followers](#), respectively. Looking at Sarea's X publicly visible activity, we can see that on October 31st, he posted for the first time in seven months, declaring

Houthi support for the Palestinians, in English. He has continued to post multiple times per week since, mostly in English, with engagement steadily growing.



Figure 3 Yahya Sarea had not posted for seven months before announcing support for Palestine

As their online presence has expanded, the Houthis have skillfully leveraged social media, alongside the coverage their attacks have garnered. As Fahmi Albaheth, President of the Internet Society of Yemen, told [Foreign Policy Magazine](#), “The Houthis’ online messaging is all produced and executed at a very high quality,” and they use it to depict their attacks as sources of pride for Arab populations. In the past year, they’ve ramped up English content to broaden their global appeal and increase prominence, Albaheth explained.

Earlier this year, the New York Times [wrote that](#) “many people with large social media followings have been eager to share pro-Houthi messages,” asserting that the Houthis consider their informational war just as important as their military one. [Forbes](#), reported that their “misinformation campaign [continues] to make the rounds on social media,” and quoted geopolitical analyst Irina Tsukerman, as saying the Houthis’ multilingual propaganda apparatus, dispensed through social media, “has a significant advantage of understanding the Western public mindset.” While the Houthis take on Israel (and the US) militarily, they also fight for the hearts and minds of the global populace. But are they succeeding?

Houthis winning the media war?

By being actively engaged on social media, the Houthis have been able to disseminate a narrative that runs counter to those typically run by Western media regarding terrorist groups, portraying themselves as righteous in the context of Israel's war.

This media proficiency they've developed is largely due to "training and coordination with Hezbollah-affiliated outlets such as Al-Manar and media professionals aligned with the so-called Axis of Resistance", the [Italian Institute for International Political Studies \(ISPI\)](#) says. The Houthis' media productions seem to mirror the style and rhetoric of other Iran-backed groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, who also use defending Palestinians to justify their actions. And much like the other Axis groups, for the Houthis, it seems to be working. "In terms of public messaging, the Houthis have positioned themselves to win the media battle," ISPI suggests. The battle they speak of, is, of course, against Israel.

After a year of Israel's war on Gaza, 42,126 Gazans have been killed and over 98,000 injured - though a widely circulating [recent letter](#) signed by 99 American doctors to the Biden administration suggests the death toll is actually 118,908. On top of conducting what many are calling a 'genocide', Israel is now bombing Lebanon as they wage war on Hezbollah, killing thousands of Lebanese, and in the Occupied West Bank, they've killed [751 people](#).

As it has expanded its wars, Israel's favorability worldwide has declined steeply. As far back as January, [Time Magazine](#) reported that 42 out of 43 countries' perception of Israel had decreased by an average of 18.5%, numbers which have only decreased further since. The [largest protest movement](#) in recent history has taken place in cities across the world calling for an end to Israel's war. Polling shows 61% of [Americans](#) want the US to stop arming Israel, while 60% of UK [respondents](#) say Israel has 'gone too far.'

Israel appears to be "losing the PR war", in the words of the [Times of Israel](#) and [Donald Trump](#). As anti-Israel sentiment grows, support for its enemies – including the Houthis – inadvertently grows. As the famous adage goes, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend". The more unpopular Israel becomes, and by default, its supporters in the West, the more inclined people may be to sympathize with its foes.

In Saudi Arabia, [polling](#) showed 96% of its population agrees with breaking all ties with Israel, while positive attitudes towards Hamas rose from 10% to 40% from August to December 2023. In Egypt, over 90% of people believe Hamas "did not kill civilians on October 7", with the same results in Saudi Arabia. If support for Hamas has grown in the past year, then those fighting alongside them, against a common enemy, will surely be seen more positively.

The increased positive perception of the Houthis has been well-covered in Western media. Vox, a left-leaning news outlet, [said](#) the Houthis had “[struck] at the very heart of global capitalism while resisting the most powerful militaries in the world.” They described the Houthis as a group that “few outside the Middle East had given much thought to until a few months ago”, though “through these attacks, they’ve achieved a global profile.”

The [New Yorker](#) wrote earlier this year that the US and UK “air strikes on the Houthis appear to have galvanized opposition to U.S. foreign policy across the Middle East and in Yemen, where many have watched the bombing of Gaza with anger, and support the actions of the Houthis.”

In the UK, the [Financial Times](#) (FT) quoted a Jordanian man living there as saying “Among all of my friends, there’s a completely positive perception of the Houthis. No one has a critical thing to say about them right now.” One Palestinian student living in Jerusalem, who knew nothing of the Houthis before their Red Sea strikes, told FT, “Our only supporter is Yemen. For the first time, I felt someone supported us with actions, not just words.”

Is the Houthi cause legitimate?

While many around the world may be looking at the Houthis as heroic defenders of besieged Palestinians, some of those more familiar with the group – and how they rule at home – allege that their solidarity is nothing but propaganda.

Ibrahim Jalal, a Yemeni scholar at the Middle East Institute, [said](#) the Houthis have long been “masterful” at propaganda, and that their solidarity with Palestinians is “no exception”. He acknowledges their success, calling them “disruptive and very popular actors” who are contrasting themselves with other Arab states who opted for diplomacy rather than military power.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav, an associate professor of international relations at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, [supports](#) this view, describing the Houthis’ solidarity with Palestine and their Red Sea attacks as part of “an effort to position the group in contrast to neighboring Gulf states’ recent moves toward normalization with Israel,” and as a “performance” for both domestic and regional audiences. Their position also serves to cut through the many divisions in Yemeni society and strengthen their projection of “a legacy of sovereign solidarity, she says.

Allison Minor, writing for the [Brookings](#) Institution, describes the Houthis' motivations behind their attacks as threefold: upholding the anti-American and anti-Israel tenet of their slogan, asserting themselves as a regional player, and rallying domestic support inside Yemen.

The motives proposed by Minor seem to align with the outcomes of the Houthis' actions. Their global recognition and support from the region's populations (and beyond) *have* turned them into a regional player; enough of a threat to warrant military action from the UK, USA, and Israel. In terms of rallying domestic support, the Houthis have been recruiting record numbers of fighters since last year, according to [Al Jazeera](#). Their attacks have "gone a long way to restoring a sense of national pride among many Yemenis," says [Responsible Statecraft](#).

As for upholding the core tenet of their slogan, there is perhaps no better or more feasible way for the Houthis to honour "Death to Israel, Death to America" than to engage in attacks on Israeli cities and US ships. And with the core goal of Iran's Axis of Resistance being to remove American and Israeli influence from the region, attacking Israel from all sides is a powerful way to start.

However, perhaps the best argument against the Houthis' legitimacy as defenders of Palestine is their own human rights record at home. A 2022 [Human Rights Report](#) from the UN found that in Yemen, the Houthis imposed severe restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and movement while engaging in unlawful arrests, torture, gender-based violence, and religious persecution against its own people. This has only worsened during their maritime attacks, [according](#) to Niku Jafarnia, a Yemen researcher for Human Rights Watch, who said "The international rise in support for the Houthis is giving them cover to commit more human rights abuses against their own people."

Not only that, but the Houthis have been recruiting children en masse, "under the pretext of supporting Gaza," by exploiting their poor educational background, economic vulnerability, and social marginalization, according to [Justice for Yemen](#). This is a serious violation of both Yemeni and international law.

With the Houthis committing human rights abuses against its own people and breaking international law, are they the protectors the Palestinians deserve? Perhaps it's better than no protectors at all.

It is possible for the Houthis' actions to be based on genuine solidarity, while also furthering their broader motives. As [Gregory Johnsen](#), a veteran Yemen observer at Washington's Arab Gulf States Institute sees it, while the Houthis may be sincere in their support for Palestine, they have also "utilized what's happening in Gaza to advance their own goals."

As much of the world remains powerless to stop Israel's onslaught, backed by the military might of the US and UK, groups like the Houthis, along with Hezbollah and Hamas, take the positions of freedom fighters for the oppressed, fighting against [what they describe](#) as imperialist powers. With Israel seemingly acting with impunity, people may overlook the troubled histories of groups like the Houthis and Hamas, focusing solely on their resistance against Israel's unchecked actions.

The big question is – what might they do with this newfound global recognition and power?

The Houthis' future: regional and global implications

The Houthis' rapid rise and aggressive stance against Israel and Western interests could signal a new chapter in the Middle East's ever-shifting power dynamics. With Iran's recent missile launches on Israel, the Houthis' alignment with Tehran's "Axis of Resistance" and its regional strategy is becoming increasingly clear. This isn't an isolated incident but seemingly part of a broader global shift. According to a [December 2023 report](#) from geopolitical intelligence firm Dragonfly Intelligence, anti-Western sentiment, particularly against the U.S., is widespread across the Middle East and North African (MENA) regions, and continues growing with unconditional Western support for Israel.

Iran's relationship with the Houthis may reflect its wider ambitions to reshape regional power. Tehran and Moscow have been developing closer ties through the Ukraine war, and in late September, Iran was [brokering talks](#) for Russia to supply the Houthis with advanced Russian missiles. The Washington Institute [suggests](#) the Houthis might "exploit new opportunities by cooperating with other axis players in Iraq as well as with Russia, potentially offering Yemen as a platform from which Iran can deploy advanced weapons against Israel and the West without drawing direct retaliation."

With the U.S. providing unconditional military and financial support to Israel, Russia's backing of the Houthis and Iran could signal a broader geopolitical shift in which the Houthis play a larger part in combatting Western influence in the region. As U.S. influence wanes, Moscow could be positioning itself as a counterweight, deepening its involvement in the region's evolving power dynamics.

As the world [seems to polarize](#) between pro- and anti-Western blocs, the Houthis' prominence may signal a broader reorientation of power. Whether they remain an arm of Iran's strategy or leverage their newfound recognition for a more independent role, their future actions could shape the region's dynamics and test Western resolve. Their rise is intertwined with Iran's ambitions and

possibly Russia's opportunism—and with a growing tide of anti-Western sentiment in MENA, how the West responds could define the region's geopolitics in the years to come.

Conclusion

The Houthis' transformation from a regional faction to a globally recognized militant group is a reflection of their success in using conflict and media strategy to amplify their influence, but it cannot be looked at in a vacuum, isolated from Israel's actions. The more Israel expands its war - increasing the death toll in Gaza, the occupied West Bank, Lebanon, Yemen - potentially to Iran, with seemingly no interest in any diplomacy, the more people may turn to violent and extremist groups like the Houthis. Every rocket that hits Israeli soil is met with Western [condemnation](#), regardless of whether anybody is harmed, yet the killing of tens of thousands of non-Israelis in the region is [met with](#) "Israel has the right to defend itself," even as they invade their neighbors. The Arab and Muslim world is hearing the message loud and clear: "Your lives aren't as important."

So long as Israel is allowed to continue to act unchecked, extremist groups, including those in Iran's Axis of Resistance, will be able to position themselves as righteous defenders, rallying support domestically, regionally, and across the world. It seems only Israel ending its war could take away the ability of the Houthis (and Hezbollah) to stand as heroes for the oppressed. Otherwise, the Houthis are perfectly poised to play a larger role in the region's geopolitical landscape, and could continue on their current trajectory, growing into something that poses a much larger threat than what they're currently capable of.

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- The views expressed in this paper reflect those of the author.

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