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Leverage Beyond Yemen: Ansar Allah and Its Iraqi Alliances

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Introduction

Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthis, an insurgent group focused on enhancing its power in Yemen, part of which it controls, has in recent years taken on a significant cross-border role as part of the Iran-backed Axis of Resistance in the region. This is perhaps best illustrated by the group's disruption of maritime traffic through the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which it undertook in response to Israel's assault on Gaza following Hamas' attack in October 2023, as well as its drone and missile strikes on Israel itself. In fact, however, Ansar Allah had begun parlaying its growing power into external leverage even earlier, especially vis-à-vis the Gulf Arab states. The group's cooperation with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella organization bringing together several Iraqi paramilitary groups, and its use of Iraqi territory for attacks on Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), indicate as much. Ansar Allah's ability to reinforce itself domestically over the past two decades while expanding regionally turned it into a leading

cross-border non-state actor in the region, further emboldening it to engage in escalatory or deescalatory actions at home and abroad.

However, with rebels in Syria having toppled former president Bashar al-Assad and Israel having weakened Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran militarily, financially, and politically, the Axis of Resistance has sustained major blows. This alone would have left Ansar Allah in a vulnerable position, but it has also had to contend with the challenge—however limited—posed by Israeli and Western countries' bombing of military and civilian infrastructure in the part of Yemen under its control. Admittedly, the group can expect continued support from the PMF, which, for the most part, has been unaffected by recent events. And Iran, Ansar Allah's major backer, is almost certain to continue financing and arming the group to some degree, given its increasing value amid the fall of the Syrian regime and Hezbollah's losses in Lebanon. Nevertheless, it is not clear whether this will suffice for Ansar Allah to retain its newfound role as a regional player, one that is able to hold sway beyond Yemen's borders.



Ansar Allah and the PMF: Old Partnership, Expanding Scope

As a largely unrecognized political authority, Ansar Allah was unable to establish formal relations with states other than Iran and Syria. This made the prospect of forging ties with pro-Iran non-state or quasi-state actors in Iraq particularly attractive. Within this context, the relationship between Ansar Allah and factions falling under the umbrella of the PMF dates to at least 2012. That year, Ansar Allah sent fighters embedded within Iraqi and Lebanese paramilitary groups to Syria in support of the Assad regime, which was facing an armed uprising following the Arab Spring. And in 2015, mere months after Saudi Arabia and several Arab partners and allies dispatched military forces to Yemen to restore the internationally recognized government there and neutralize Ansar Allah, the latter sent a senior delegation to Iraq to seek all manner of support, especially from the PMF.

In the years since, many meetings, public and private, have taken place with Iraqi and Iranian officials and religious clergy, as well as leaders of PMF groups. Today, Ansar Allah, which is reported to have opened a political office in Baghdad, enjoys strong ties with Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kata'ib al-Nujaba, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Organization, and Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq. These PMF factions covertly host hundreds of Ansar Allah military personnel on their bases, where they engage in joint training and experience-sharing activities.¹ The July 30, 2024, elimination of midlevel missile officer Hussein Mastoor al-Shaabal along with six other Ansar Allah personnel in a U.S. airstrike targeting a Kata'ib Hezbollah drone facility in Jurf al-Sakhr, south of Baghdad, suggests that the extent of Ansar Allah's presence in such camps is underestimated.² In September 2024, reports suggested that approximately fifty PMF-seconded Ansar Allah fighters were redeployed from a military base in Iraq's Bukamal area (near the country's western border) to Syria—presumably to showcase interoperability, bolster the “unity of resistance arenas,” and serve as a warning to Israel.

At their core, pro-Iran Shiite factions in Yemen and Iraq are bonded by several commonalities: they share anti-American and anti-Israeli worldviews, seek to dominate internal political landscapes, have an expansionist agenda, and frame their actions against U.S. forces in the region as resistance. Perhaps most importantly, they have the same patron: Iran. It is therefore no surprise that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), through its Quds Force, has proven instrumental in orchestrating technical and operational collaboration between Ansar Allah and its regional counterparts. Tehran aims to facilitate experience-sharing and increase interoperability during times of turmoil, and also to use whichever axis front is most suitable to project Iranian influence in the region at any given time.

There are several ways in which Ansar Allah, which has two decades of insurgency experience against the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition that intervened militarily to support it in March 2015, is useful to the PMF. For one thing, the group has—thanks to Iran and Hezbollah—proven adept at assembling and modifying drones and guided short-range missiles from illicitly transferred individual components, something necessitated by air and naval embargoes that prevent the shipment of weapons to Yemen. This includes variants of Iranian-designed Shahed and Sammad drones, which are made using Chinese and other equipment.³ Additionally, given that Ansar Allah has, with Iran's and Hezbollah's support, reportedly shot down at least fourteen American drones using Iranian surface-to-air missiles, the group can help PMF factions to improve their air defenses.⁴ This appears to have already happened: “The Islamic Resistance in Iraq,” an umbrella term believed to be employed by PMF factions, has claimed two successful downings of U.S. drones since November 2023.

For Ansar Allah, Iraq offers political, economic, military, and geopolitical benefits, particularly in that the country shares an 811-kilometer-long border with Saudi Arabia. In September 2019, during a time of increased friction between Ansar Allah and Riyadh, a drone attack was launched on Saudi Aramco oil facilities

in Abqaiq and Khorais. Although Ansar Allah claimed responsibility, a subsequent UN investigation found that the attack could not have originated in Yemen; it appeared to have come “from a north/northwestern and north/northeastern direction,” which would mean Iraq or even Iran, with the most likely culprits being one or more PMF groups acting on behalf of Ansar Allah. The possibility of a repeat scenario came to the fore in October 2022 as well as July 2024, when tensions between Ansar Allah and Riyadh ratcheted up again and Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq and Kata’ib Hezbollah, respectively, threatened to target Saudi Arabia. Through its quid pro quo arrangements with PMF factions, Ansar Allah had effectively outflanked Saudi Arabia and in the process confronted it with a major geostrategic challenge.

Ansar Allah’s presence in Iraq also enables the smuggling of arms from Iraqi territory to Yemen via Saudi Arabia. The PMF has even provided Ansar Allah with “free and very heavily subsidized Iraqi fuel, including diesel and oil,” which it ships to Hodeida from Basra in violation of an international embargo.⁵ This is often done through seaports in the UAE and Oman, with ship-to-ship transfers and falsified documents facilitating the process. A 2019 report by a United Nations panel of Yemen experts estimated that Iran transferred oil worth a minimum of \$24.4 million a month to Ansar Allah. Additionally, prior to reopening Sanaa International Airport in 2022, Ansar Allah would fly combatants to Iraq through Oman. Now, however, the group flies at least some of them—issued with fake passports from Sanaa Airport—to Amman, Jordan, which makes their subsequent transfer to Iraq much quicker.⁶

Finally, Ansar Allah is able to use Iraq as a base for fundraising and financial transfers. For instance, Kata’ib Hezbollah spokesman Abu Ali al-Askari, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq Secretary-General Qais al-Khazaali, and Tajammu’ Shabab al-Shariah spokesman Amir al-Musawi have organized public fundraising activities on behalf of Ansar Allah, not least to support the latter’s drone program. Contrary to their framing as independent and voluntary events, these fundraising activities are systematic mechanisms to support Ansar

Allah in avoiding scrutiny by watchdogs monitoring money laundering and terror-financing.⁷ As for financial transfers, they are often made through *hawala* networks or similarly informal methods—which complicate identification, tracing, and interception.

Together, these dynamics enabled Ansar Allah to transcend its initial status as a localized Yemeni phenomenon. This transformation reached its fullest realization with the measures the group took against Israel in response to its ongoing onslaught on Gaza, as well as its actions against countries trading with the Israelis. Beginning in October 2023, Ansar Allah demonstrated an ability to strike Israel—some 1,800 kilometers from Yemen—with drones and missiles and also hinder commercial traffic bound for or returning from there. The group also resumed issuing occasional threats against Gulf Arab states. In short, Ansar Allah had proven itself a major cross-border actor. However, the following year would change things considerably.

A Weakened Yet All-the-More Unpredictable Axis of Resistance

In 2024, the Iran-led axis was dealt significant blows. This called into question the effectiveness of Tehran’s “forward defense” strategy, which consists of deploying a network of non-state and quasi-state actors in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. It also constrained the ability of certain axis members to support each other directly. Additionally, with Syrian rebels having toppled the Assad regime and Israel having substantially weakened Hezbollah, the Iran-orchestrated strategic encirclement of Israel and the Gulf states began to disintegrate. All these setbacks are reshaping the regional balance of power to the detriment of the axis. Precisely for this reason, the IRGC’s Quds Force is almost certain to encourage a strengthening of ties between Ansar Allah and the PMF. Given Iraq’s complex internal political landscape and increasing U.S. pressure on the Iraqi government to dissolve the country’s militias, Iran may begin to rely on Ansar Allah more than the PMF. However, the extent to which Ansar Allah



(and the PMF) will prove amenable to assuming the risks involved in becoming the lead purveyors of Iranian influence in the region remains to be seen.

In Lebanon, Israel systematically eliminated Hezbollah's first-line leadership, including Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah as well as Basel Shukr and Mohammed Hussein Surour, two senior commanders who oversaw drone and missile support for Ansar Allah. This has forced Hezbollah to turn inward and focus on reengineering its own capacity, expertise, and supply chains. As a consequence, the group's support operations for other Iranian proxies and strategic partners in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq have diminished. Hezbollah is unlikely to resume offering direct strategic backing to Ansar Allah until it regains its position within the Lebanese political spectrum—which itself is hardly a certainty.

In Syria, the balance of power was reversed almost overnight, with serious consequences for Ansar Allah. In a statement, the group's Saba News Agency accused Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the rebel faction that spearheaded the ouster of the Assad regime, of complicity in executing "American-Zionist plans to target and dismantle the Axis of Resistance, sow division, and divert attention from Gaza." Damascus, which had in October 2023 rescinded its political recognition of Ansar Allah by expelling the group's representative in the hope that the internationally recognized government of Yemen would support Syria's reintegration into the Arab League, nevertheless continued to host Ansar Allah's Saadah Brigade. However, on December 7, with the HTS-led rebels advancing and the regime's forces crumbling, the Saadah Brigade reportedly retreated to Iraq alongside PMF units.

Iran, the axis's linchpin, was not spared. In tit-for-tat exchanges between Israel and Iran, Israeli airstrikes on Iran targeted military depots, sites linked to the country's nuclear program, and air defense systems protecting vital oil and gas facilities. Significantly, this sparked widespread fears of gasoline shortages, which prompted the regime to further ration its purchase. This, in turn, led to public expressions of dissatisfaction, effectively illustrating the regime's vulnerability when

basic services are affected. Additionally, rumblings of discontent over foreign policy turned into explicit criticism following Assad's fall and Hezbollah's losses. That Tehran had spent billions of dollars on the Syrian regime and Hezbollah, only for the former to collapse and the latter to suffer a major defeat, did not sit well with many Iranians. The Iranian regime is arguably at its most vulnerable point in decades.

In Yemen, Ansar Allah suffered air and missile strikes launched by Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Israel largely targeted critical infrastructure. This included Hodeida port and Sanaa airport, as well as oil storage facilities and power plants, leading to temporary disruptions. For its part, the United States struck a few Ansar Allah command and control structures in Sanaa. Although damage was not extensive in either case, and there is no information on whether senior leaders were eliminated, subsequent bombings could exact a heavier toll. This would make life for those Yemenis living in Ansar Allah-held areas, which are already under international sanctions, even more difficult.

As a whole, then, the axis has gone into decline. Moreover, the decline may prove irreversible. Paradoxically, however, this could herald the onset of a greater role for certain of its components. With Assad out of power and Hezbollah significantly weakened, Tehran may now see greater strategic value in Ansar Allah and the PMF. The former retains much of its strength and regional standing, and the latter remains unscathed, though U.S. pressure will likely increase on both as the second Donald Trump administration repursues its maximum pressure strategy toward Iran and, by extension, its proxies. In the near term, neither Ansar Allah nor the PMF will be able to help Iran salvage its regional standing and counterbalance its recent strategic losses. Yet Ansar Allah, as opposed to the PMF, is highly likely to become the main actor in Iranian-sponsored regional activities. Whereas PMF groups are increasingly backing away from confrontation with Israel, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of Ansar Allah, has spoken of continuing attacks on Israel should the latter fail to observe the terms of its ceasefire with Hamas, which

went into effect on January 19. Houthi may be hoping to position Ansar Allah as the frontline of the axis and the guarantor of the ceasefire, and himself as the successor of the late Nasrallah.

This may well reflect Iran's position. In a recent statement, former IRGC commander Hossein Allahkaram stated the following with regard to Ansar Allah: "Simply put, Syria served as a kind of backbone and connector for the Axis of Resistance, playing an unparalleled role in any potential offensive against the northern front of Palestine. However, within the framework of the strategic ideology, this role has now been transferred to Yemen following the loss of Syria." It should not come as a surprise if it emerges that such thinking is shared by current IRGC commanders—or that they encouraged the joint Ansar Allah-PMF attacks on Israel in December. Relatively rare thus far, these joint attacks may be a harbinger of future collaboration between Ansar Allah and the PMF.

Conclusion

Confronting Israel at a time when popular anger over its battering of Gaza is very high has burnished Ansar Allah's image at home and abroad. It has even served to silence—at least temporarily—otherwise rising public criticism over the group's lack of services, salary payments, and overall mismanagement of the areas of Yemen that it controls. This, together with Iran's desire to compensate for the Syrian regime's demise and Hezbollah's enfeeblement, could translate into more attacks by Ansar Allah on Israel as well as Israeli-connected maritime trade. Yet it is also possible that matters will never reach that stage. If the widespread

perception that Tehran sacrificed both Hezbollah and Assad when supporting them became too costly is shared by the leadership of Ansar Allah and the PMF groups, this may well give them pause. In such a case, irrespective of Iran's urgings, both organizations could choose to scale back their operations—something several PMF factions have already done—with a view to securing their future in a region that has seen the Axis of Resistance's power and reach diminish considerably.

About the Author

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Notes


For complete source notes, please read this article at CarnegieEndowment.org.

- 1 In-person author interview with an Iraqi security affairs expert, location and identity withheld at their request, November 17, 2024.
- 2 In-person interview with a French expert on Middle East security affairs, Paris, identity withheld at their request, December 6, 2024.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 In-person interview with a European expert on Middle East security affairs, Paris, identity withheld at their request, December 5, 2024.
- 5 In-person author interview with an expert on Gulf security, location and identity withheld at their request, November 22, 2024.
- 6 In-person author interview with a Yemeni security affairs expert, Paris, identity withheld at their request, December 6, 2024.
- 7 In-person author interview with an Iraqi security affairs expert, location and identity withheld at their request, November 18, 2024.



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