

COUNTERTERRORISM TERRORISM STUDY

Inside the Houthis' Ideology: How Do They View the United States?



Houthi military parade at Sanaa, Sep. 21, 2022. (Photo by dietrich19 is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/?ref=openverse>.)

The ideological and organizational roots of the Houthis, officially known as Ansar Allah, trace back to the 1990s in Yemen's northern Saada governorate. The movement's intellectual foundation became closely associated with Hussein al-Houthi, the brother of Abdul-Malik al-Houthi and the founder of "AL SHABAB ALMOMEN," which later evolved into the broader Houthi movement.

The Houthis have been designated by the United States as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) since 2024, reflecting growing American concerns about the group's military and regional activities, particularly in the Red Sea and international maritime corridors.

Hussein al-Houthi's ideological project can be understood as a hybrid of Ruhollah Khomeini's ideas and the rhetoric of Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, combined with strong influences from Sayyid Qutb, one of the Brotherhood's most influential ideologues, particularly through his book *Milestones*, which remains one of the most influential texts among radical Islamist movements, both Sunni and Shiite. Many of these concepts can be observed throughout Hussein al-Houthi's doctrinal lectures, known as the "malazem" and later became even more visible in the speeches and political performance of Abdul-Malik al-Houthi.

From the movement's early days, the slogan known as the "Sarkha" ("**The Scream**") became central to understanding the Houthis' perception of the United States and the West:

"God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam."



This slogan functions not merely as a hostile political and ideological slogan but also as a mobilization tool and an ideological framework that defines the enemy and links conflict to identity, religion, and sovereignty.

The term “*Malazem*” refers to the collection of ideological, political, and religious Houthi doctrinal literature attributed to Hussein al-Houthi, which today serves as the movement’s primary doctrinal and intellectual reference point.

In these texts, the United States occupies a central position not merely as a foreign state but as a symbol of a broader system perceived as targeting identity, culture, and sovereignty. This framing is evident in a doctrinal text titled “***The Danger of America’s Entry into Yemen***,” which portrays the United States as seeking to penetrate society through education, media, culture, and local elites, rather than through military force alone. The text also reflects a central belief within Houthi ideology that the conflict with the United States is not temporary or tied to a specific political moment, but rather a permanent and ongoing struggle in which the “enemy” is seen as continuously planning and operating even during periods of calm. From this perspective, escalation and rejection of de-escalation become ideologically justified, rooted in Hussein al-Houthi’s recurring belief that “the Americans will not leave us alone even if we remain silent.” Houthi narratives view concepts of the modern state, such as democracy, separation of powers, institutions, and public services, as part of an American and Western project or “conspiracy” aimed at influencing Islamic societies and weakening traditional religious rule.

In this context, Hussein al-Houthi invokes Ruhollah Khomeini and Khomeini’s characterization of the United States as the “***Great Satan***,” portraying Khomeini as one of the first to expose what he viewed as the true nature of American influence and domination in the region. This reflects how deeply revolutionary Iranian discourse became embedded in the ideological foundations of the Houthi movement.

This ideological framing becomes more explicit in the doctrinal text titled “***The Jews and Christians Will Never Be Pleased with You***.” The relationship with the West is redefined as a permanent and irreconcilable struggle, in which the West, the United States, and Israel are grouped into a single hostile camp. This hostility becomes even more explicit in Houthi Doctrinal Literature.

“***Quranic Culture***” reproduces the Houthi slogan as part of a broader collective identity and ongoing mobilization process. The Houthi discourse does not stop at constructing an external enemy; it also seeks to reshape the internal social order.

In another Houthi Doctrinal Literature titled “***No Excuse for Anyone Before God***,” society is sharply divided between supporters of the Houthi project and ‘hypocrites,’ while the very concept of neutrality is rejected from the Houthis’ perspective. This worldview draws on an older Zaydi political tradition associated with Al-Hadi ila’l-Haqq Yahya, one of the most important historical ideological references within political Zaydism. Under this framework, the “***hypocrites***” are transformed from mere political opponents into internal traitors living within society itself. This helps explain the movement’s strong surveillance tendencies and coercive social control mechanisms within Houthi-controlled territories.

The movement’s social and religious hierarchy is further developed in “***The Responsibility of Ahl al-Bayt***.” Jihad is presented as a religious obligation tied to defending religion and confronting corruption, while “Ahl al-Bayt” are positioned as the vanguard leadership of society. “Ahl al-Bayt,” referring to the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, are portrayed in Houthi ideology as the natural religious and political leadership of society. Critics of this framework argue that the concept of “Ahl al-Bayt responsibility” extends beyond a purely religious dimension and reflects a form of social and lineage-based superiority, portraying “Ahl al-Bayt” as possessing a natural right to political and religious guardianship over society not only within Yemen but potentially across the broader Arabian Peninsula.



What is particularly notable, however, is that the Houthis do not rely solely on ideological rhetoric. The movement also appears focused on building a long-term survival structure. In many ways, the Houthis seem to have studied the failures of other militant movements, particularly those that became entirely dependent on external sponsors or failed to establish independent financial and logistical networks. Recent developments suggest that the group has attempted to build a greater degree of operational independence from Iran, not ideologically but financially and logistically, in an effort to avoid the collapse experienced by organizations that lost their primary external patron. As a result, the Houthis have expanded wartime economic structures, smuggling networks, and alternative financing channels, alongside growing activity in East Africa through routes that combine smuggling, logistical coordination, and illicit trade. Security and regional assessments also point to the use of financial and commercial networks linked to the group in money laundering operations and regional financial transfers, including activities connected to Basra in southern Iraq, aimed at facilitating the movement of funds and bypassing sanctions and restrictions. Various reports further indicate the existence of networks associated with the Houthis that are involved in transporting weapons and ammunition across the Horn of Africa, with extensions reaching armed groups in different parts of the continent. Over time, these activities have contributed to the emergence of a transnational ammunition trade network stretching from East Africa.

The real danger lies not only in financing or smuggling itself but also in the Houthis' growing ability to build relationships that transcend traditional sectarian divisions among extremist organizations. This reflects a growing level of operational pragmatism that often overrides ideological considerations.

Ultimately, the Houthi doctrinal texts, combined with the group's evolving operational behavior, reveal a project that extends far beyond a conventional local insurgency. The Houthis are not merely constructing an "external enemy" for mobilization; they are building a long-term system that integrates ideology, wartime economics, and transnational networks, making them among the region's most adaptive and resilient armed actors.

The movement's founder, Hussein al-Houthi, goes even further by implicitly positioning himself as an heir to the legacy of radical Islamist movements across the Islamic world, including al-Qaeda and its leaders. In one of his lectures, he explains al-Qaeda's failure against the United States not merely in terms of strategy or capability, but in terms of what he considers "legitimate leadership" descending from Ahl al-Bayt. While praising Osama bin Laden's sincerity and commitment to opposing the United States, Hussein al-Houthi suggests that bin Laden ultimately failed because he was not from Ahl al-Bayt. By contrast, figures such as Hassan Nasrallah are implicitly portrayed as possessing an additional source of religious and lineage-based legitimacy. Hussein al-Houthi applies the same logic to movements such as Hamas, implying that their failures are tied not only to military realities but also to the absence of what he views as divinely qualified leadership.

From this perspective, the Houthis can be seen as among the first radical Islamist non-state actors to systematically study the failures and wars of previous Islamist armed groups in order to extract strategic lessons from them, rather than simply imitate their rhetoric or experiences. This may help explain part of the movement's adaptability, resilience, and long-term survival strategy.

