

Between loyalty and survival: The Houthis' dilemma

written by Noa Lazimi | 02.03.2026

So far, the Houthis have not directly joined the confrontation between Israel and the United States on one side and Iran on the other. The central question is whether this restraint will endure, or whether it is likely to shift in the near future, depending on the duration of the combined campaign and the depth of its impact on the Iranian regime and the broader regional environment.

Several indicators suggest that escalation remains a possibility. According to reports, Iran has instructed the Houthis to operate in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Red Sea—an especially sensitive maritime corridor of global strategic importance. From Tehran's perspective, this constitutes a significant pressure tool which could bear consequences for the entire region. For their part, the Houthis could resume attacks on commercial vessels en route to or associated with Israel, without necessarily being drawn into a direct clash with the United States, in line with the May 2025 ceasefire agreement, under which they clarified that the arrangement did not include Israel.

In a recent speech, the group's leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, declared that his movement stands in full solidarity with Iran and is “fully prepared for any developments”, calling on supporters to stage mass rallies in Sanaa and other provinces. Given the longstanding strategic partnership between Tehran and Sanaa—through which the Houthis have benefited from Iranian expertise and the supply of advanced weaponry—the organization's leadership may find it difficult to refrain from demonstrating tangible support. Even if it avoids large-scale engagement, it may opt for a symbolic or limited move designed to signal commitment.

Some argue that the Houthis may seek to leverage the current confrontation to return to center stage and will not settle for symbolic backing alone. The Yemeni militia has demonstrated boldness in the past and views itself as a leading actor within Iran's “axis of resistance”—a status it may seek to reinforce in light of Hezbollah's entry into the campaign last night and the immediate, albeit relatively limited scope of engagement, by pro-Iranian militias in Iraq alongside Tehran.

Against this backdrop, security experts caution that since the ceasefire in Gaza, the Houthis have used the lull to significantly bolster their capabilities and conduct military preparations, including ground exercises. Although their intermittent rocket fire in previous rounds with Israel largely failed—most missiles were successfully intercepted—there are signs of growing sophistication in their weaponry, including the unprecedented use of surface-to-surface missiles equipped with a dispersal warhead.

At the same time, the Houthis face restraining considerations. Launching attacks against Israel or disrupting international shipping in the Red Sea could provoke a particularly forceful Israeli—and potentially American—response, especially if Houthi aggression targets U.S. assets and bases in the region. The organization’s leadership is well aware of American capabilities, as demonstrated in the large-scale U.S. air and naval operation (“Rough Rider”) conducted against Houthi targets in Yemen in March 2025 in response to Red Sea attacks, and is unlikely to seek a repeat experience.

Israel, too, represents a significant deterrent factor, based on past operations that included severe strikes on ports and infrastructure and the targeted killing of senior figures. The elimination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on the first day of the combined campaign against Iran may also likely to resonate. Such a message would not be lost on al-Houthi, who is unlikely to wish to have a similar fate.

The Houthis therefore face a clear dilemma: strategic loyalty to Iran and the projection of regional power versus a fundamental interest in survival. If they choose to join the campaign, their move will likely be measured and limited—designed to signal solidarity and project strength without being drawn into a prolonged confrontation that could exact a heavy price. At the same time, Israel must prepare for the more severe scenario in which the Houthis decide to assume significant risk and enter the conflict as a leading actor within the axis of resistance.

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