

Houthi movement

'Thank God for the Houthis': why Arab world is backing Yemen rebels

Islamist group wins praise for defending Palestinians, helping it escape scrutiny for increasing repression at home

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Raya Jalabi in Beirut 8 HOURS AGO

His wavy hair billowing in the wind, Rashed al-Haddad looked into the camera as his dinghy neared the Israeli-linked cargo vessel that has become an unlikely tourist attraction since it was seized late last year by Houthi rebels.

In a video recorded in the shadow of the Galaxy Leader, now languishing off the Yemen coast, the photogenic 19-year-old told his legion of new social media followers that all Yemenis were “with Palestine until victory” and called on them to maintain their support for Gaza.

“We thank God for the Houthis,” wrote one Iraqi commenter under one of Haddad’s viral Instagram posts, a sentiment echoed by hundreds of others. “They’re the only Arabs helping Palestine.”

Haddad said he was not a Houthi, but his videos have helped to raise the profile of the Iran-linked militant movement that controls much of Yemen, racking up millions of views on apps such as TikTok — whose young users have dubbed him “TimHouthi Chalamet” for his resemblance to the Hollywood star.

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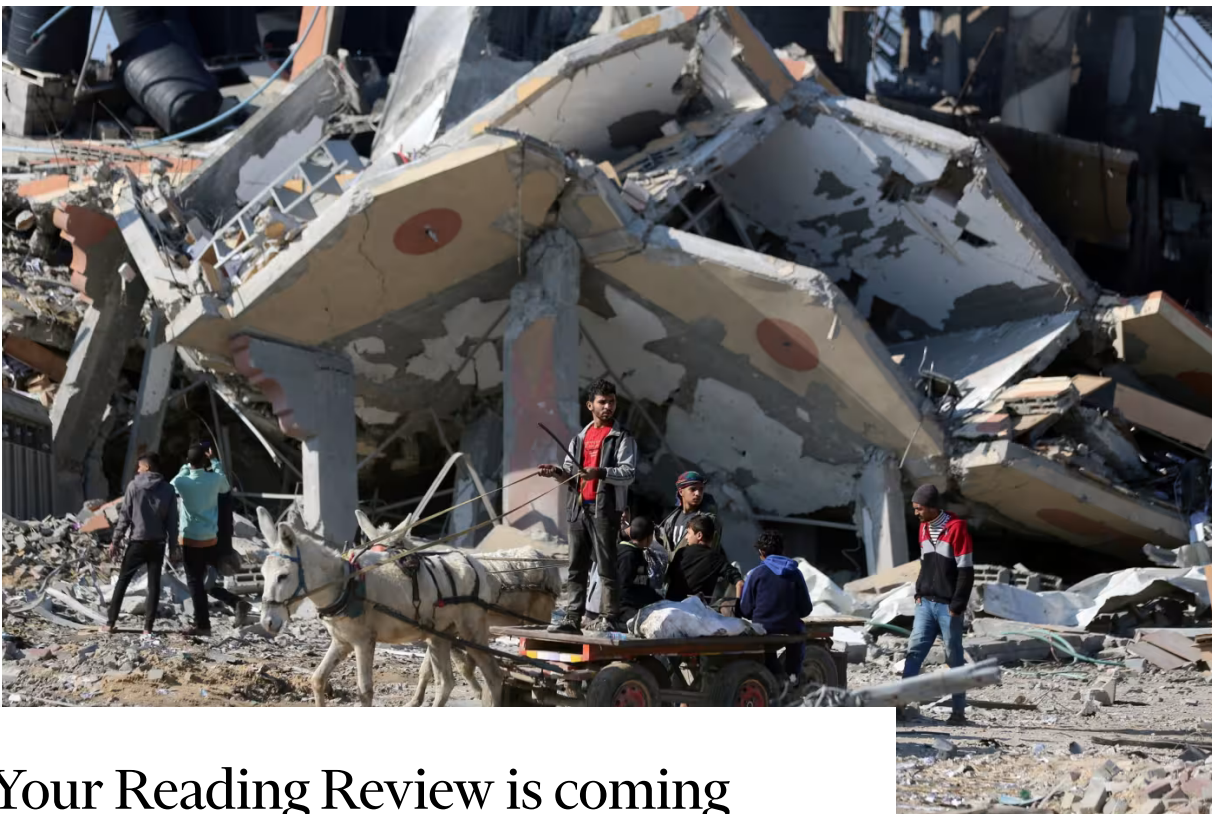
ne videos racking up

The [Houthis](#) have been gaining new fans across the Arab world, many of whom know little about the Islamist group’s history or increasingly repressive tactics in their home

little about the Islamist group's history of increasingly repressive tactics in their home country. Their popularity, which seems to transcend religious divisions, has surged since the war between Israel and Hamas erupted in October, and the movement began its brazen missile and drone attacks on ships traversing the Red Sea.

While the Houthis' campaign has caused little physical damage to vessels, it has disrupted global trade and cemented their reputation as one of the most active factions in Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance. The group has drawn the US and UK into combat, although the strikes that began this month have done little to dispel the Houthi attacks.

"Among all of my friends, there's a completely positive perception of the Houthis," said a 28-year-old Jordanian man living in the UK. "No one has a critical thing to say about them right now."



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the war began, leading to rising

Muslim worlds over the

been killed in the

and displaced by the war

1,200 Israelis were

streamed into Arab

homes, the outrage has focused on the perceived double standards and the reluctance

of the west to hold Israel to account — not just for this war, but also for its treatment of the Palestinians over the past 75 years.

Much of that rage is directed at the US for its support of Israel. This has only sharpened since its strikes on the Houthis. “These countries want us to believe they are moral when really they are hypocrites,” said Bushra Hind, 27, an accountant in Kuwait.

“They have done nothing to stop the atrocities in Gaza,” Hind said. “But the minute global trade and shipping were threatened, then suddenly they spring into action.”

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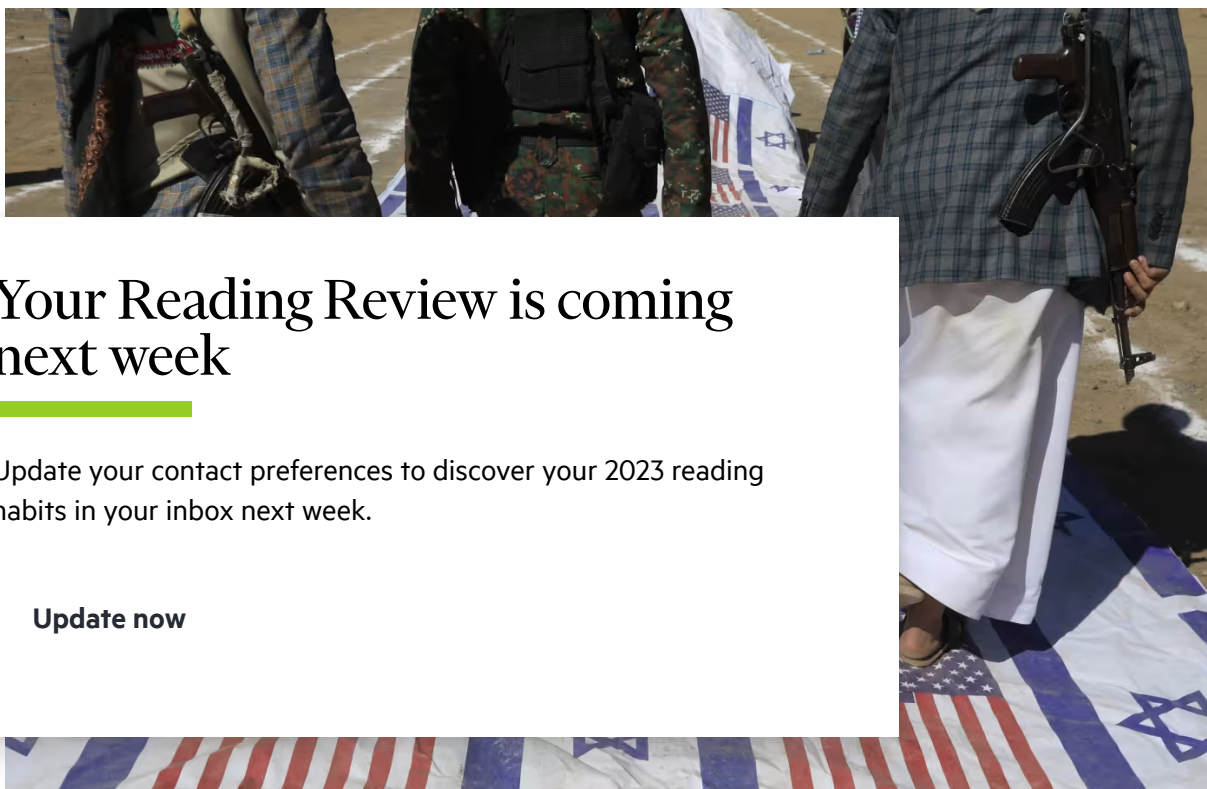
The Yemeni movement, also known as Ansar Allah, was initially led by members of the Houthi tribe who belong to the Zaydi Shia sect. It turned into a scrappy force in the early 2000s that fought to overthrow Yemen's autocratic government. Their slogan is "Death to America, Death to Israel, a curse upon the Jews".

While the Houthis have ties to Iran, they are not as ideologically aligned with Tehran as other militants in the region. But they have moved closer to the Islamic republic, which helped them fight a nine-year war against a Saudi-led coalition that intervened in Yemen's civil conflict in 2015.

Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis were killed either by fighting or by the famine and disease that took hold in its wake. But the Houthis endured, a shaky truce with Riyadh was agreed and the rebels held on to much of Yemen, including the capital Sana'a.

Ibrahim Jalal, a Yemeni scholar at the Middle East Institute and a partner at Horizon Insights, said the Houthis had long shown themselves to be "masterful" at propaganda, and the way they aligned themselves with Gaza was "no exception".

"By framing themselves as defenders of the Palestinian cause, they've leveraged their attacks and emerged as disruptive and very popular actors," Jalal said. He said the Houthis were contrasting themselves with the Arab states who had turned to diplomacy rather than wield military might.



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Tribesmen loyal to the Houthis step on US and Israeli flags during a protest in Sana'a, Yemen © Yahya Arahah/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

A poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research conducted in late 2023 found that residents of Gaza and the occupied West Bank ranked Yemen's response to the Israel-Hamas war as the most satisfying among regional actors.

"Our only supporter is Yemen," said Sadeen, a Palestinian student living in Jerusalem who said she had not heard of the Houthis before she saw footage of their dramatic Red Sea strikes. "For the first time, I felt someone supported us with actions, not just words."

In Yemen, where many loathe the Houthis, praise for the group is at an all-time high, even among their arch-rivals who have called the strikes on shipping targets "righteous".

"Personally, I've never liked the Houthis: they're a police state, they've sentenced many people to death unfairly, including their political opponents," said a 35-year-old Yemeni man living in a part of south Yemen not controlled by the Houthis.

"But what they're doing now for Palestine: it's a good deed. And I'll support anyone who's making life harder for those who oppress the Palestinians, especially when they're Yemeni like me."

The increase in public support has alarmed many Yemenis and rights groups, who say the Houthis have become even more repressive as they have consolidated power at home.

"The international rise in support for the Houthis is giving them cover to commit more human rights abuses against their own people," said Niku Jafarnia, a Yemen researcher for Human Rights Watch.

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humanitarian aid, down on freedom of month sentenced a es".

le they claim to ggest city Taiz under

t the Houthis'

domestic agenda, and that he would be uncomfortable if they were restricting human

rights. But he added: "As an Arab whose main priority is to stop the bloodshed in Gaza, anything that's good for Palestine, and you'll probably look the other way."

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