

REPORT

Yemeni Forces Arrest Houthi Leader Al Emad: An Intelligence Victory and a Blow to the Houthis

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Introduction

Yemeni border guards have arrested Houthi leader Hassan Ali Al Emad on his way to Yemen from Iran via the border crossing in Al Mahrah Governorate. The head of the military information division in the Yemeni national army said that Al Emad's arrest is considered a tremendous intelligence victory for the Yemeni national army forces. Who is Hassan Al Emad? What kind of relationship does he have with Iran? To what extent does he exert sectarian influence over the Houthi militia? And why is his arrest significant?

1. Al Emad, the Iranian political system and the IRGC

Al Emad is one of the most dangerous ideological leaders and one of the prominent Twelver Shiite marjas for the Houthi militia. He is married to an Iranian woman and owns a house in Tehran. Al Emad, along with his four brothers Ahmed, Essam, Mohammad and Ali, moved to live with their father Yahya Al Emad who resides in Iran's city of Qom.

He is among the most important founders of the Houthi militia and supports Iran's expansionism in Yemen. He moved from Yemen to the Iranian city of Qom in the 1990s. At the time, there was no censorship over Iranian cultural activities in Yemen.

The Iranian embassy in Sana'a sent Al Emad on a scholarship to Qom, where he studied the Twelver Shiite doctrine in Iranian religious centers and seminaries. He and his brothers were systematically taught to become clerics to promote Twelver Shiism in Yemen.

Al Emad received training within the ranks of the IRGC once he graduated from secondary school. He is one of the staunchest supporters of Iran's revolutionary thought. He collaborated with the IRGC in multiple areas. He was also honored by the commander-in-chief of the IRGC General Hossein Salami at a conference held by Iran titled "Mujahideen in Exile" in July 2020. At the conference, Al Emad delivered a speech in which he lauded the 1979 Iranian revolution.

He said: "Due to the movement and uprising of Imam Khomeini and the martyrs of the revolution, the Yemeni

people awakened. This movement restored the identity of the Yemenis.”

With the aim of influencing the public, he made sectarian comments regarding the operations of the Arab coalition and the legitimate Yemeni government — carried out through Operation Decisive Storm, which aimed to free Yemen from the Houthi militia. Al Emad used phrases like “the event of ghadir khumm” and “the right of Imam Ali to be the ruler as Prophet Mohammed’s successor” in the context of the war in Yemen.

Al Emad added: “The enemies are well aware that if Yemen became stronger, it would bear the banner of struggle against injustice and will help the Infallible Imam.”

Praising the Iranian political system, he said: “The Iranian authority is not taking the lead of the Iranian nation only, but also the entire Muslim community worldwide.” About the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, he said: “All Muslims pay heed to the orders of the wise leader.”

2. Al Emad and the Houthi Militia

As mentioned above, Al Emad and his brothers were prepared and educated to become prominent clerics propagating the Iranian version of Twelver Shiism in Yemen. In addition, he is considered to be one of the main connections between Iran and the Houthi militia. He has many media networks that publish ideological content and communicate with influential figures in several European and Western countries.

Al Emad has shuttled between Iran and Arab and Western capitals to promote the militia, coordinate its operations, collect donations and deliver Iranian weapons to it.

He ran the aforementioned activities through using civilian and charitable fronts that have ceaselessly worked to implement Iran's project in Yemen. The main front is known as The Future of Justice and Knowledge and Action Foundation.

In addition, some sources indicated that Al Emad participated in financing and supervising a Houthi cell that planned to assassinate the late Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2006. At the time, Al Emad was settled in Iran. He returned to Yemen in 2011. Since then, he shuttled between Sana'a and Tehran until 2015. Following the launch of Operation Decisive Storm, he managed to exit Yemen only in 2016 aboard a UN-affiliated airliner.

As for his brothers, Essam is a religious marja while Mohammad chairs the board of directors of the pro-Houthi Al-Hawiya network which includes Al-Hawiyah channel and Al-Hawa newspaper. Meanwhile, Ali Al Emad is the chairman of the Central Agency of Control and Accountability that is operated by the Houthis. His brother Ahmad is the head of the militia's outreach team.

Yemeni military sources revealed that Hassan Al Emad was the ringleader of a network that smuggled Iranian

weapons to Yemen. His name came up in the investigation reports related to Iranian smugglers — detained aboard the ships Jihan 1 and Jihan 2— and was identified as the coordinator of the smuggling operation between Iran and Sana'a.

It is worth mentioning that the Houthi militia counterfeited a passport of Hassan Al Emad —issued by the passports administration in Sana'a — and sent it to him to smuggle him into Yemen. Al Emad was also appointed head of the Iranian-Houthi coordination committee. The committee was established by Iran with the aim of supporting the [coupist](#) militia.

Houthi supervisors called for suspending all negotiations until Hassan Al Emad was released, including the Houthi supervisor Sultan al-Jahhaf — who accused Oman of colluding in the arrest of Al Emad. This makes it likely that the arrest will be raised in any future negotiations.

3. Implications of the Houthi Escalation After Arresting Al Emad

Yemeni security services consider Al Emad as one of the Houthi's staunchest propagators. His arrest is a deadly blow for the Houthi militia and the Iranian political system which traffics military experts and individuals into Sana'a. Yemeni sources said that it is likely that a higher ministerial committee will arrive in the coming days to complete the ongoing investigations with Al Emad.

It is worth mentioning that multiple observers made a

link between the Houthi escalation—inside Yemen and against Saudi Arabia—and the arrest of Hassan Al Emad. This prompted the militia to ratchet up its military escalation by targeting the city of Ma’rib and civilian targets in Saudi Arabia.

Over the past days — on the heels of Al Emad’s arrest—the Arab coalition announced in a statement published by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) that three explosives-laden drones targeting Saudi Arabia were intercepted and destroyed, bringing the number of drones intercepted last Friday and Saturday to six.

Additionally, Saudi air defense intercepted a ballistic missile fired towards the city of Dammam.

The Arab coalition’s spokesperson indicated that the Houthi militia’s attempts to target civilians are hostile and barbaric. He added that the coalition will observe Houthi activities of firing explosives-laden drones and will take all necessary measures to protect civilians.

Conclusion

Arresting Al Emad is an intelligence and security success for the Yemeni and Arab coalition forces. At the same time, it is a deadly blow to the Houthi militia and Iran. The latter has invested tremendous efforts in preparing Al Emad to serve its interests and agenda. He was the most important connecting point between the Houthi militia and the Iranians through his role as a marja and through facilitating the transfer of weapons and funds from Iran to the Houthis in Yemen. Therefore, both the Iranians and Houthis heavily depended on him.

Thus, his arrest is a pressure card that can be used against both the Iranians and the Houthis. He possesses extremely sensitive information about the Iranian agenda in the region, especially about Iranian-Houthi relations. As a high ranking Houthi leader, he represents the interests of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Yemen.

When the investigations begin, the role assigned to Hassan Al Emad will be further exposed. Some observers believe that arresting him is important to calculate the extent and depth of Iranian influence in Yemen. It is likely that the Houthi militia will be forced to open channels of communication with the Yemeni government through Omani mediation.

It is also expected that Al Emad will be a strong negotiation lever in the hands of the legitimate Yemeni government—whether when it comes to the government's prisoners held by the Houthi militia or the other issues that contribute to a political solution in Yemen.

At a minimum, it is expected that the arrest of Al Emad will reactivate the Yemeni negotiations. This may be reflected in the raising of some other files and the weakening of the Houthis' position in the negotiations, especially given that Al Emad's brothers occupy sensitive positions within the ranks of the Houthi militia. It is also expected that Oman will be the main mediator in the future negotiations.



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