Other side of Signalgate

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PERSPECTIVE

On the morning of March 14, while Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Vice-President J. D. Vance debated a possible US attack on Ansarullah (Houthi) targets in a now infamous Signal chat, it was afternoon in Yemen, and a five-year-old boy named Hamad was still alive. Hamad had spent the day running around the city with his father, and when night fell, he was back home, playing in the yard with his cousins, likely slipping one too many sweets into his mouth.

In a thread called "Houthi PC Small Group," which included other top national-security officials, Vance seemed concerned about getting dragged into another conflict that was peripheral to American interests. The operation was meant to disrupt the Houthis' ability to attack commercial ships and American military vessels in the Red Sea, which they had been doing for about a year and a half, in response to Israel's bombing campaign in Gaza. Vance floated the possibility of delaying the strikes so that the Administration could work on the public "messaging". "I understand your concerns," Hegseth told him, but messaging would be "tough" no matter the timing. "Nobody knows who the Houthis are," he explained.

The debate didn't last long. Within half an hour, Vance was persuaded. The next day, as sunset prayers ended and families broke their Ramadan fast in north Yemen, Hegseth announced to the group in Washington, "Weather is FAVORABLE. Just CONFIRMED w/ CENTCOM we are a GO for mission launch." Shortly after, a "package" of F-18s was launched, the first of many strikes.

Just before one in the morning, a man whom I'll call Hassan — he asked that we not use his real name, owing to concerns about his safety — bolted awake to a thunderous sound. His house, in the Qahza area in Saada, was shaking. The windows shattered as he heard another boom, and then another. "The noise of the air strikes were very unlike the Saudi ones because they were too loud, too big," he recently told me, referring to regular bombing campaigns that a Saudi Arabia-led coalition has conducted against Houthi strongholds since 2015.

Smoke and dust filled the rooms, and Hassan scrambled to rush his frightened children outside. He split his family into small groups among relatives' homes and returned to the site of the strike. His neighbor's two-story house, about a hundred metres from his own, was levelled. The house belonged to Mosfer Roga'ah, Hassan told me — a Bedouin from the country's northern Kitaf district who had arrived in the neighborhood around six years earlier. Roga'ah had several sons who were married, so the house was often full of women and children, as it had been that night.

Hassan's brothers were already there, digging through the rubble, searching for the remains of a family. "They were scattered and torn into pieces," he said. Rescuers recovered mangled bodies. Among them were two faces Hassan recognized well: the five-year-old boy, Hamad, and a three-year-old girl, Dareen, who was rushed to a hospital in Sana'a, Yemen's capital. Hamad was dead.

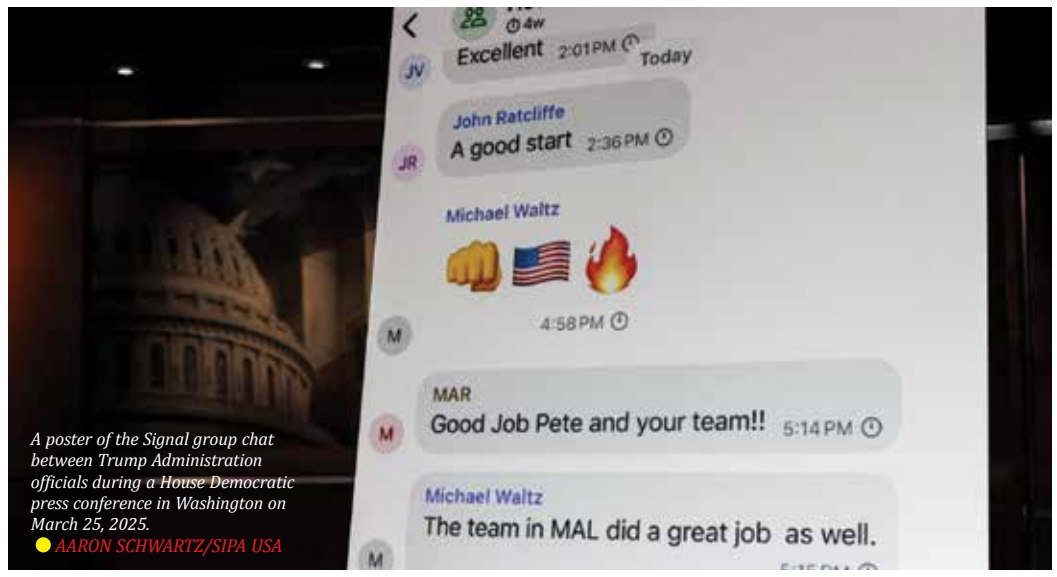
He "was roasted," Hassan recalled, adding quietly that it was a "horrifying" sight. He later sent me photos of Dareen that were circulating on social media; she was attached to a breathing tube, her body covered in gauze and her face marbled with burn marks. In the debris, locals found remnants of Tomahawk missiles, which Airwars, a British nonprofit organization that tracks civilian harm in conflict zones, confirmed were the munitions used in the strike.

The controversy that has now been dubbed Signalgate has garnered considerable shock, amusement, and anger, illustrating the ineptitude of the Trump Administration for knowingly discussing war plans over a commercial phone app and for unknowingly inviting a journalist into the discussion. (The White House has insisted that it did not reveal any "war plans".) Less has been made of the strikes themselves, which raise their own set of questions, including what the US's aims are in Yemen, and under what legal authority it is pursuing those aims.

American presidents have struck Yemen before, often pointing to the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, a joint resolution passed after 9/11, which gave the president the power to attack "terrorist" targets in foreign countries without a formal "declaration of war". But Trump hasn't invoked the A.U.M.F.; instead, he echoed aides who say that it is within the president's constitutional power to launch attacks for defensive purposes. His predecessors, too, seemed to operate with that license: most recently, the Biden Administration continued to strike Houthi targets, without Congressional approval, even after taking the Houthis off the list of foreign terrorist organizations. "For years, presidents have been asserting expansive power to use military force, under questionable legal authorities, with relatively little pushback from Congress," Matt Duss, the executive vice-president at the Center for International Policy, a foreign-policy think tank in Washington, D.C., told me. "That's extremely dangerous no matter who's in the White House, but particularly with someone like Trump."

The Trump Administration's hostilities in Yemen appear more expansive than past campaigns, directed not just at Houthi weapons sites but also at Houthi leaders in residential areas. Perhaps more alarmingly, Trump hints at long-term engagement. "We will use overwhelming lethal force until we have achieved our objective," Trump vowed. There remains little clarity on what right the president has to repeatedly strike a foreign country without the approval of Congress.

In addition to this legal debate, Signalgate raises questions about the reliability of American intelligence. According to Yemen's health ministry, more than 50 people were killed in the strikes,



A poster of the Signal group chat between Trump Administration officials during a House Democratic press conference in Washington on March 25, 2025.
● *AARON SCHWARTZ/SIPA USA*

and more than a hundred were wounded. One of the attacks hit a cancer treatment center that was under construction, according to Houthi authorities. Another, the Roga'ah house.

Mosfer Roga'ah and his four sons were not home when the missiles dropped, Hassan told me. They were at the mosque for taraweeh, special prayers performed late into the night during the holy month of Ramadan. A video shared on Facebook shows them returning to where the house once stood. A few men can be seen helping someone stagger through the glare of headlights toward the wreckage. Seconds later, a loud scream pierces through a din of panicked voices. According to Hassan, that was one of Roga'ah's sons, Abdullah — the father of Dareen and Hamad.

Eventually, Hassan told me, rescuers who dug through the rubble counted 15 dead, all women and children. Among them were Risala, age 13; Saleh, age nine; Abdullah, age six; Nazam, age six; Abdulkader, age five; Hadi, age three; and Motlak, a newborn baby. The baby's mother was also killed.

The New Yorker was not able to fully corroborate Hassan's account, and Saada is nearly impossible for foreign journalists to access at the moment, but news reports and public social-media posts about that night counted civilians among the dead. (Many of the posts were made by people with Houthi affiliations.)

Shortly after the strikes began, Trump declared on Truth Social that he had ordered the military "to launch decisive and powerful Military action," adding that the Houthis "have waged an unrelenting campaign of piracy, violence, and terrorism against American, and other, ships, aircraft, and drones."

Officials in the Trump Administration seemed unfazed by the prospect that civilians might die in the bombardment. "The first target — their top missile guy — we had positive ID of him walking into his girlfriend's building and it's now collapsed," Michael Waltz, the national-security adviser, wrote on Signal, in an update to the team. "Excellent," Vance replied. The C.I.A. Director John Ratcliffe: "A good start." Waltz responded with emojis of a fist bump, an American flag, and fire. (Later, the US Department of Defense said that it "takes allegations of civilian harm seriously and has a process in place to review them".)

Trump's White House, like its predecessors, continues to emphasize that the Houthis are supported by Iran. But the group also emerged from local political dynamics. The founders of the Houthi movement belonged to Zaydism, a Shia branch of Islam that ruled northern Yemen for a thousand years before being overthrown in the 1960s. A couple of decades later, Zaydism was revived as a cultural and political movement by Hussein al-Houthi, in part as a way to challenge Yemen's central government, which disfavored Zaydis and neglected northern areas, like Saada. After 9/11, the US poured military aid into Yemen as part of its global war on terror, expanding the Yemeni president's ability to quell Houthi dissent — in turn drawing more support for the movement.

Yemen underwent a significant transformation. The Houthis grew in power and popularity, then launched a conflict that spiralled into a series of wars with the central government. During the Arab Spring, in 2012, the Yemeni president stepped down; in the years that followed, Houthis stormed the capital. Regional and world powers, concerned that the group would expand, began to bombard and raid the country. The United States backed Saudi-led bombing campaigns, supported a naval and air blockade, and instituted a sanctions regime; together, these measures have further entrenched the Houthis' hold on power, killed hundreds of thousands of people, and helped to push more than 17 million into conditions of severe hunger. Today, Yemen remains one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world.

The US continues to pummel Yemen. Recently, Trump shared a black-and-white video, from an aerial viewpoint, of a bomb landing on a group of about 70 people in a circle, which a Houthi-led news agency later described as a social gathering for Eid. Smoke fills the screen and, within seconds, a crater emerges. "These Houthis gathered for instructions on an attack. Oops, there will be no attack by these Houthis!" the president wrote.

Meanwhile, Roga'ah and his sons are surveying their own catastrophic damage. The fresh graves of their dead wives and children are lined neatly in a row, the result of a strike hastily agreed to over text message thousands of miles away. "They have hearts broken into pieces," Hassan told me, of Roga'ah and Abdullah. "Every day they are crying, remembering this family that disappeared without any reason."

The article first appeared on The New Yorker.

People gather at the site of a house hit by a US strike, in Saada, Yemen, on March 16, 2025.
● *NAIF RAHMA/REUTERS*

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