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YEMEN'S HOUTHIS: IMPACT OF RED SEA ATTACKS ON GLOBAL ECONOMY AND COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGIES

Abstract

The paper deals with issues related to the security environment created by the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. The article is focused on the involvement of Yemeni Houthis in the events that developed after the attack. The paper provides the history of the Houthi movement, political goals, strategy and tactics, and funding sources for the Houthi movement. The study also analyzes the reasons for the Shiite Houthis' support for the Sunni Hamas and highlights the challenges that resulted from the attacks in the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. The Houthi attack in the Red Sea is analyzed at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels. The paper offers an analysis of the impact of the Houthi attack on the global economy. The study also explores the coalition efforts directed against the Houthis and is based on the theoretical principles of counter-terrorism strategies. The work summary emphasizes the certainty of a multifaceted, complex approach to solving the problem. This section provides the issue's theoretical, academic, and scientific understanding.

Keywords: Houthi movement, Yemen, Red Sea attacks, counter-terrorism, Iran proxy.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

The phrase with which the paper begins has a fairly frequent use in international politics and originates from when human associations sought allies to achieve political goals. Political fragility in the Middle East leads to frequent changes in the regional distribution of power, which is why states in the region often have to form alliances with entities they fought yesterday (Gause III 2010).

On October 7, 2023, at dawn, the terrorist organization Hamas launched a surprise attack on southern Israel from the Gaza Strip. Hamas fighters entered Israeli-controlled territories and carried out acts of sabotage (BBC News 2023). After the initial surprise, the Israeli Defense Forces took measures against Hamas, first within Israel and then in Gaza. According to the Israel Defense Forces, 1,143 people died in the attack, and 252 civilians and soldiers were captured. Hamas continues to use hostages to negotiate a ceasefire agreement (Israel Defense Forces 2023).

External actors, including Iran and Hezbollah, are directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. Iran has been supplying Hamas with weapons and money, while Hezbollah, Iran's regional proxy in Lebanon, has carried out attacks on Israel (Norton 2018, 79-82). The Iran-backed Houthi movement in Yemen also plays a significant role. The Houthis have launched rocket attacks on Israel and targeted international shipping in the Red Sea, forcing companies to avoid the Suez Canal, which has led to significant economic losses (Romaniuk and Kaunert 2024).

The main direction of the research of this paper will be to determine the role of Yemen's Houthis in the renewed conflict on October 7, 2023. We will discuss the history of the creation of the Houthis, their political goals, and the strategy and tactics to achieve these goals. In addition, we will analyze for what reason the Shia Houthi Movement helps the Sunni Hamas, how strong their connection is, and how it justifies the phrase uttered at the beginning of the work: *"The enemy of my enemy is my friend"*. In addition, we will specifically review the impact of Houthi attacks in the Red Sea on the global economy

and international trade and discuss Western coalition efforts against them, as well as counter-terrorism strategies implemented to prevent the attacks.

Chapter I: Yemen's Houthis – History, Political Goals, Strategy and Tactics of Terrorist Organization

The Houthi movement, known as Ansar Allah¹, originated in the early 1990s in northern Yemen's Saada province, rooted in the Zaydi Shia community. Founded by Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, a Zaydi cleric and former Yemeni parliament member, the movement arose in response to the marginalization of Zaydis by the Yemeni government and the spread of Wahhabism (Weir 2007, 249-256).

Initially focused on religious and cultural revivalism, the movement soon evolved into an insurgency. The first major conflict, the Saada War, began in 2004 when the government tried to arrest Hussein al-Houthi, leading to his death but not the end of the movement. His brother, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, then took leadership, transforming the group into a formidable political and military force (Brandt 2017, 202-205; International Crisis Group 2009).

The Houthis capitalized on the instability following the Arab Spring in 2011 and expanded their influence. By 2014, they had captured Yemen's capital, Sanaa, effectively overthrowing the transitional government. They now control significant portions of northern Yemen, including strategic locations like Hudaydah, providing services in the territories they govern (Day and Brehony 2020, 233-253).

The Houthis' military capabilities have grown, with support from Iran, enabling them to conduct cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia. Their military strategy includes guerrilla tactics, conventional warfare, and psychological operations bolstered by the use of ballistic missiles, drones, and naval mines (Juneau 2016, 655-660).

Their political leadership is structured around different wings, with Abdul-Malik al-Houthi leading the ideological side and other figures like Abdullah al-Hakim handling military strategy. Their goals center on greater autonomy for northern Yemen, protecting Zaydi identity, and resisting foreign intervention, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Western powers (Transfeld 2015, 155-158; Sharp 2021, 8).

The Houthis have been designated as a terrorist organization by several countries, including the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, due to their missile attacks on civilian infrastructure and their involvement in the conflict between Hamas and Israel. Despite humanitarian concerns, these designations highlight the complexity of the conflict and the challenges in reaching a political settlement (Blinken 2021).

Understanding the Houthis' evolution and tactics is crucial to analyzing their motivations and role in the broader regional conflict.

Chapter II: The Houthi Movement – Organization's Funding, Ties to Iran, and Positions in Yemen

The Houthi movement sustains operations through a mix of domestic revenues and external support, reflecting the complex nature of their insurgency. This chapter covers their funding sources, financial methods, and spending.

The Houthis heavily rely on taxation and extortion in controlled areas. They levy taxes on businesses, individuals, and international aid organizations and charge customs duties at key ports like Hudaydah. They also extort local businesses and wealthy individuals. For example, a 2023 circular set land customs duties at 50% (United Nations Security Council 2023).

Control of key oil infrastructure allows the Houthis to profit from fuel sales and smuggling across the region. They divert fuel shipments intended for humanitarian use to the black market (United Nations Security Council 2023).

Seizing assets from banks, businesses, and wealthy individuals provides substantial resources. Notably, in 2016, they seized over \$100 million from Yemen's Central Bank (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2017).

The Houthis engage in smuggling weapons, drugs, and contraband. This trade sustains their military efforts and circumvents sanctions (OECD 2022, 12-27).

¹ The official name of the Houthi Movement means 'Supporters of God' (Arabic: انصار الله) (Zeidan 2024).

Financial aid and equipment from sympathizers in Yemen and abroad, especially from Iran, are significant. Iran's support, estimated at hundreds of millions annually, includes financial aid, weapons, and training (Robinson 2024).

The Houthis use informal systems like *hawala*² and cash transactions to manage finances and evade detection. Front companies and shell corporations facilitate their financial activities (Bahadur 2020, 8-10; Almahfali and Root 2020).

Key areas of spending include military operations (e.g., acquiring weapons and drones), salaries for fighters, and governance in controlled territories, including social services (Zamir 2022, 60-61). They also fund media operations to control the narrative and support other militant groups (AlMasirah 2024).

The Houthis have established administrative structures in controlled areas and engaged in international diplomacy despite being designated terrorists. Their role in peace talks, like the 2018 Stockholm Agreement, highlights their significance in conflict resolution (Human Rights Watch 2023; United Nations 2018).

Chapter III: The Shia Faith - Supporting Sunni Hamas and the Red Sea Attacks

The Houthi movement, or Ansar Allah, stems from the Zaydi sect of Shia Islam in northern Yemen, tracing back to the 8th century. Their religious and political narrative is shaped by Zaydi's beliefs, justifying their resistance against Yemen's government and foreign interventions (Haykel 2022, 17-20). Founded by Yehya bin al-Husayn in 983 CE, the Zaydi theocratic state ruled Yemen until a 1962 revolution established a republican system. Despite losing political power, devout Zaydis' dream of reclaiming it persisted (Al-Dawasari 2024). This historical context highlights the Houthis' longstanding sense of grievance and legitimacy in their ongoing struggle.

Aligning with Iran's Shia axis, the Houthis use their Zaydi identity to frame their struggle as a divine mission. Their support for Hamas and anti-imperialist stances reflect shared anti-Zionist sentiments, aiming to challenge Saudi Arabia and its allies while highlighting Yemen's humanitarian crisis. This alignment extends to their strategic operations, with Iranian support providing them with advanced weaponry and training, bolstering their regional influence and military capabilities (Bahfi 2020, 9-12).

Since October 2023, the Houthis have increased attacks on Red Sea vessels, with 53 reported incidents by January 2024. Their tactics include drone strikes and missile attacks, showing regional influence despite mixed success (U.S. Department of Transportation / Maritime Administration 2024; Raydan and Nadimi 2024). The Houthis' aggressive tactics, including boarding attempts, reflect their strategic objectives and regional positioning (Knights 2024, 7-9; Nevola 2024). Notably, their anti-shipping campaign has drawn international attention, disrupting global maritime traffic and emphasizing the broader geopolitical stakes in the region.

The Houthis' actions align with their ideological and strategic goals, using support for Hamas and anti-shipping attacks to challenge Israel and Saudi interests. Their military tactics include drone swarms, missile strikes, and water-borne improvised explosive devices (Nevola 2024). The Houthis' involvement in the Red Sea attacks underscores their regional influence and impact on global maritime security. Their continued aggression, combined with their use of religious and ideological rhetoric, will remain crucial in understanding their role in the regional power structure and their impact on international security (Minor 2024; Ali Harisi 2023).

Chapter IV: Impact of Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea on the Global Economy

The Red Sea is a crucial international trade route linking the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal and Bab-al-Mandeb Strait. It is vital for economic stability, handling 10-15% of global trade (U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency 2024). The Bab-al-Mandeb Strait, a key chokepoint, sees 60-70 ships daily, including oil tankers and cargo ships. Approximately seven million barrels of oil pass through daily, underscoring its importance for energy markets (Henderson 2023). The route is also critical for LNG transport, especially after the Ukraine conflict and agreements between

² Hawala (Arabic. حوالة – transfer, trust) – an unofficial way of sending money without really moving any actual cash. Originated from South Asia in the 8th century.

Western nations and Qatar. About 10% of global oil and 8% of LNG pass through this corridor (Kouman 2024).

Recent Houthi attacks have severely disrupted global trade, impacting various vessels and forcing major shipping companies like Maersk and CMA CGM to reroute. By January 2024, traffic through Bab-al-Mandeb dropped to 46% of 2023 levels, while Suez Canal traffic was 70%, and Cape of Good Hope routes saw a 63% decline (IMF Portwatch 2024). This disruption has led to increased shipping costs due to longer routes and higher fuel consumption. The additional fuel costs for rerouted ships may reach \$1-2 million per trip (U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency 2024), with higher consumer prices likely due to increased operational costs (Kouman 2024).

Insurance premiums have surged as well, with war risk premiums for Red Sea vessels rising from 0.07% to 0.5-0.7% (Saul 2023). Shipping costs have increased across the board, with container shipping rates rising significantly. The Baltic Dry Index, which tracks raw material shipping costs, fell from over \$3,000 in December to \$1,948 in June (Bloomberg 2024), while the cost of shipping a 40-ft container has increased from \$1,521 to \$4,801 (Drewry 2024).

The Red Sea instability has also impacted the oil market. Oil prices have risen following a period of decline, partly due to reduced demand from China (Henderson 2023). Additionally, BP's halt of LNG exports to the Red Sea led to a 7% increase in European natural gas prices (Katanich 2023). Many European countries, now less reliant on Russian pipelines due to the Ukraine conflict, have turned to shipborne natural gas and oil from the Middle East, further stressing the Red Sea route (Faucon, Said and Kalin 2022). Red Sea oil traffic has surged 140% due to cargo redirection (Kouman 2024).

Egypt, which relies heavily on Suez Canal fees, has seen a 40% revenue drop as of January 2024 (Reuters 2024). The government's struggle to acquire foreign currency amid rising inflation exacerbates the economic strain (Alsaar 2024).

Despite international efforts to stabilize the region, the Red Sea remains a volatile area. The ongoing threat from Houthi attacks continues to affect shipping decisions, with many companies opting for longer routes like the Cape of Good Hope. A Fitch Ratings report indicates that companies using alternative routes have seen costs rise significantly, benefiting those who can still transit the Red Sea (Fitch Ratings 2024). The increased costs and disruptions highlight the need for international cooperation to secure critical maritime routes.

The Houthi campaign's impact on global trade mirrors the 1973 Arab oil embargo, presenting a new challenge to international standards of maritime access and navigation (Office of the Historian n.d.; Krane 2024). The situation underscores the vulnerability of global trade routes to regional conflicts, prompting calls for stronger international intervention and diplomatic efforts to restore stability.

Chapter V: Targeting Yemen's Houthis – Coalition Efforts and Counter-Terrorist Strategies

The response to Houthi attacks on the Red Sea and Bab-al-Mandeb Strait has been robust, led by a multinational coalition that includes the United States, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE. The coalition's efforts aim to secure this critical waterway and protect international shipping.

Before the coalition's military campaign began, the U.S. Navy actively countered Houthi provocations by intercepting missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles. In December 2023, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced Operation Prosperity Guardian, involving a coalition of 20 states to safeguard maritime routes. U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) led this mission, conducting patrols and surveillance throughout the Red Sea. Bahrain, home to NAVCENT's headquarters, was the only Arab coalition member (Altman 2024). Despite ongoing threats, these patrols significantly reduced successful Houthi attacks on commercial vessels. The coalition intercepted weapon shipments and prevented major disruptions through enhanced surveillance and real-time intelligence sharing (Knights 2024, 13-15).

Challenges included the Houthis' access to advanced weaponry from Iran and their adaptable tactics. The conflict's asymmetric nature often offsets traditional military advantages (Knights 2024, 5-7). China and Russia did not participate in Operation Prosperity Guardian, advocating for a truce in Gaza and criticizing the coalition's actions (United Nations 2024).

Counter-terrorist strategies employed include military, diplomatic, and economic measures. Increased surveillance, real-time intelligence exchange, and unmanned devices have enhanced maritime security. Diplomatic efforts aim to isolate the Houthis and reduce Iranian support, though success has been limited. Sanctions imposed by the UN and the U.S. target Houthi leaders and supporters (United

Nations Security Council 2023; U.S. Department of the Treasury 2023). Despite the designation of the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) by the U.S., they are not classified as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) (Atlantic Council Experts 2024).

A holistic approach is needed, combining military, diplomatic, and economic strategies to address the root causes of instability. The coalition's naval operations are crucial, but long-term stability in the Red Sea will depend on comprehensive efforts to engage with regional powers and address humanitarian crises (Ronzitti 2012, 34-36). The ongoing conflict highlights the complexity of modern maritime security and the need for sustained international cooperation and advanced technological capabilities to ensure the security of this vital corridor.

Conclusion

The Houthi movement's actions in the Red Sea reflect a strategic effort to assert control over Yemen and disrupt global trade routes. Backed by Iran, they have leveraged their position to challenge Israel and its allies, prompting a robust response from a multinational coalition led by the USA and UK. This includes intercepting weapon shipments, conducting joint naval patrols, and imposing sanctions. The Houthis' alliances with groups like Hamas and Hezbollah highlight the fluid nature of regional conflicts.

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