



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 13, 2024

A Closer Look at Yemen's Houthis

Yemen's Houthis, from their base on the eastern flank of the Red Sea, are arguably one of the largest threats to international shipping.

Recent weeks have seen this Yemen-based, Iran-aligned group stage more than two dozen drone and missile attacks on commercial shipping headed for the Suez Canal, claiming that the assaults are a retaliation against Israel's bombardment of Gaza, and the global community's failure to stop Israeli actions.

Israel launched a military campaign against Hamas in the Gaza Strip after an October 7 massacre of Israelis by Hamas, which is considered a terrorist group by the United States and EU.

In December, the Houthis proclaimed that [they would target all Israel-bound ships](#) regardless of their nationality, warning all international shipping companies against dealing with Israeli ports.

On January 11, the Houthis fired a ballistic missile in the Gulf of Aden in what U.S. officials said was the 27th attack on commercial shipping by the group since November 19.

On November 18, the group hijacked a cargo ship called the *Galaxy Leader*, which it has since transformed into a tourist attraction for Yemenis.

"We have emphasized to everyone that [the Houthi] operations are to support the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip, and that we cannot stand idly by in the face of the aggression and siege," Houthi chief negotiator and spokesperson Mohammed Abdulsalam declared to news outlet Al Jazeera in December.

Furthermore, the group has also maintained that it will continue to attack Israel-linked ships even after the strikes on Yemen by the United States and U.K. on January 11. Washington has tried to portray the air strikes as part of an international effort to restore the free flow of trade in a key route between Europe and Asia, through which travels roughly 12 percent of the world's shipping traffic. The United States said Australia, Bahrain, Canada, and the Netherlands supported the operation against the Houthis.

Al Masirah, a Houthi-operated satellite news channel, reported that Western strikes hit the al-Dailami air base north of the capital, Sana'a; the airport in the strategic port city of Hodeidah; a camp east of Saada; the airport in the city of Taiz; and an airport near Hajjah.

"The American and British enemy bears full responsibility for its criminal aggression against our Yemeni people, and it will not go unanswered and unpunished," Yahya Saree, the group's military spokesperson, said.

"They were wrong if they thought that they would deter Yemen from supporting Palestine and Gaza,"



AP Images
Houthi supporters in Sana'a, Yemen



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Abdulsalam declared. The group's "targeting will continue to affect Israeli ships or those heading to the ports of occupied Palestine," he wrote.

Additionally, the Houthis have been demanding that Israel permit increased humanitarian aid into Gaza.

At the moment, key shipping companies have diverted their vessels around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, adding some 40 days of voyages and disrupting global trade. The increase in delivery costs is fanning fears it could trigger a fresh bout of global price inflation.

Evidently, the prospect of a wider Middle East conflict looms large, even as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other senior Biden administration envoys traveled to Middle East capitals this week to calm tensions.

Who Are the Houthis?

The Houthis, also calling themselves Ansar Allah ("supporters of Allah"), form a militant group that controls large parts of Yemen, including the capital, Sana'a, and some of the western and northern areas near Saudi Arabia.

In the late 1990s, the Houthi family in far northern Yemen established a religious revival movement for the Zaydi sect of Shi'a Islam, which had once ruled Yemen but whose northern heartland had become impoverished.

As tensions with the Sunni-led government mounted, the Houthis waged a series of guerilla wars with the national army as well as a brief border conflict with Sunni Saudi Arabia.

Yemen is around 65 percent Sunni Muslim, and around 35 percent Shi'a.

In 2011, an Arab Spring revolt compelled the country's ruler, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to step down after 30 years in power. Under a U.S.-backed transition accord, President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi replaced him, and talks paved the way for a constitutional convention and new elections.

The Houthis, nonetheless, rejected a federation plan that arose from those discussions.

In 2014, the Yemeni government lowered fuel subsidies, triggering protests, and the Houthis eventually rose to prominence in 2014 when they rebelled against Yemen's government and seized Sana'a, Yemen's capital, dislodging the government.

Concerned by the rising influence of Shi'a Iran, which supports the Houthis, Saudi Arabia stepped into the conflict at the head of a Western-backed coalition in March 2015 in support of the internationally recognized government. In turn, the Houthis established control over much of the north and other big population centers, while the internationally recognized government was located in Aden.

The decade-long civil war in Yemen has plunged the country into what the UN in March 2023 called "the world's worst humanitarian crisis."

Around 21.6 million people, or two-thirds of Yemen's population, are "in dire need of humanitarian assistance and protection services," the UN reported.

The violence has devastated ordinary Yemenis, who maintain that between airstrikes, economic collapse, and rising starvation, life has become almost unbearable.

Both sides have repeatedly attempted to organize peace talks.

Notably, the Houthis have been in ceasefire talks with Saudi Arabia while Yemen's official government



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is based in Aden and led by President Rashad al-Alimi.

Al-Alimi rose to power in 2022 after the country's exiled president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, ceded power to him. Relations between Hadi and the Houthis were particularly frosty.

Fighting between the Houthis and the Saudi-led military coalition mainly dwindled last year. In 2023, the Yemeni rebels and government forces also exchanged around 800 prisoners over three days.

In 2023, Saudi Arabia also restored ties with Iran, raising prospects for the Yemen peace process.

Observers have cautioned that the Houthis should not be regarded merely as Iranian proxies, for the group has its own base, interests, and ambitions. On their end, the Houthis deny being puppets of Iran and claim they are tackling a corrupt system. Although Iran promotes the Houthis, Yemen specialists say the Houthis are driven mainly by a domestic agenda though they share a political affinity for Iran and Hezbollah. It remains unclear how deep the Houthi-Iran relationship goes.

A member of what has been called the "Axis of Resistance," an anti-Israel and anti-Western alliance of regional militias (Hamas, Hezbollah, and Houthis) backed by Iran, the Houthis have "Death to America, Death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory to Islam" as their slogan.

The Saudi-led coalition targeting the Houthis has slammed Iran for arming and training the Houthis, a charge Iran and the Houthis deny. Moreover, the coalition also lambasted Lebanon's Hezbollah for helping the Houthis, an accusation it disavows.

The Houthis claim to possess a liquid-propellant missile that could have a 1,350 km to 1,950 km range, enough to potentially target Israel. (Yemen and Israel, separated by Saudi Arabia, are about 1,580km apart at their nearest point.)

The U.S. military said an American destroyer in the Red Sea intercepted cruise missiles and drones launched toward Israel on October 19. An attack on October 31 involved ballistic missiles and drones, as per statements by the Houthis.

On December 6, Israel's military said an Arrow missile — part of Israel's Iron Dome air-defense system — intercepted a Houthi missile over the Red Sea.

In response to the U.S. and U.K.-led strikes against the Houthis this week, Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, an ally of Iran and the Houthis, said that American actions confirm that Washington is in "full partnership" with Israel.

"The US is a full partner in the tragedies and massacres committed by the Zionist enemy in Gaza and the region," a statement from the group read.

Denouncing the U.S. and U.K. strikes, Hamas said in a statement that the U.S. and U.K. governments will bear responsibility for their attacks' impacts on regional security.

The Gaza-based Palestinian Islamic Jihad claimed that recent escalations verify that the U.S. administration is "waging a war of genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza."

"We call on the people of the Arab and Islamic nation to take action in rejection of the aggression against Yemen, which rose up in defense of Gaza and the holy places of Muslims in Palestine."

Iraq's Harakat al-Nujaba, a paramilitary group, also warned that American interests and coalition countries will not be safe from now on.

Moreover, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement, "The attacks are happening in an effort



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to extend the full support of the US and UK in approximately the past 100 days for the war crimes of the Zionist regime against the Palestinian people and the besieged citizens of Gaza.”

Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani said, “These attacks are a clear violation of Yemen’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and a breach of international laws.”

The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged for restraint and “avoiding escalation” after the strikes, and said it was monitoring the situation with “great concern.”

“The kingdom emphasizes the importance of maintaining the security and stability of the Red Sea region as the freedom of navigation in it is an international demand,” it said.

Also, a spokesperson for NATO said, “These strikes were defensive and designed to preserve freedom of navigation in one of the world’s most vital waterways. The [Houthi] attacks must end, Houthi forces are supported, supplied and equipped by Iran, so Tehran has a special responsibility to rein in its proxies.”

Although NATO did not participate in the attack, the United States and the U.K. are part of the bloc, while two other NATO members, the Netherlands and Canada, provided support.

For its part, Russia condemned the U.S. and U.K. strikes, stating that they breached international law and wrongly took advantage of a UN Security Council resolution that had demanded the Houthis stop attacking shipping lanes.



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