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# Houthi threats on both sides of the Bab al-Mandab Strait: Military and Security Repercussions

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We are a research institution concerned with studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international influences on it. Through interpreting history, analysing the present, and predicting the future, in the aim of positive participating for better future of Yemen

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## Abstract

In the final quarter of 2023, the Houthi group in Yemen intensified its aggressive actions, launching missile attacks and deploying unmanned suicide drones in the Eilat (Umm al-Rashrash) region. It heightened its threats in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, purportedly targeting commercial ships allegedly affiliated with the Israeli government. The Houthi claims connect these actions to Israel's alleged war of genocide in the Gaza Strip, initiated during the Al-Aqsa Flood operation by Hamas on October 7, 2023. Adding to the tension, on November 19, the "Galaxy Leader" ship, flying the Bahamas flag, was hijacked and brought to the port of Saleef.

Despite these provocations, Israeli and American responses remain relatively subdued, leaving anticipation for potential escalations, including the possibility of resorting to counter-violence. Such a course of action could have widespread consequences on both sides of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, potentially undermining existing local and regional security structures in the face of escalating threats. Additionally, non-traditional actors in Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan, as well as organized crime groups engaged in activities, such as maritime piracy and smuggling of weapons, drugs and people, are further complicating the security landscape.

This paper aims to delve into the military and security ramifications of the Houthi threats on both sides of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, focusing on their recent hostile activities during the ongoing Gaza conflict. The discussion revolves around three key questions:

1. What are the specific threats posed by the Houthis on both sides of the Bab al-Mandab Strait?
2. What variables and motives surround these threats?
3. What are the emerging military and security repercussions on both sides of the strait?

### **First: Houthi threats and their interactions on both sides of Bab al-Mandab Strait:**

The recent Houthi group's threats on the Bab al-Mandab Strait extend from nine years of hostility, marked by a notable reduction during a truce declared on April 2, 2022. Using ballistic missiles and unmanned suicide aircraft, the Houthis targeted oil and gas export ports in government-controlled areas along the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. Such locations as Al-Dabbah in Hadhramaut Governorate, Qena and Al-Nashima in Shabwa Governorate, as well as the Balhaf gas facility on Shabwa's coastline, experienced diverse attacks sporadically in August and October 2022.

Commercial ships attempting to access government ports in these regions received warnings as a precautionary measure. In August 2023, after Mahdi Al-Mashat, the head of the Supreme Political Council under the Houthi Authority, warned a commercial ship approaching the port of Aden to load gas, the ship altered its route toward the port of Duqm in the Sultanate of Oman. This incident, along with similar occurrences, was substantiated by the Security Council Group of Experts in Yemen's report issued in early November 2023. The report revealed that there were Houthi threats against the two companies owning liquefied gas tankers, namely Sinmar Regent and APEC Bolivar, to impede their shipping activities.<sup>1</sup>

On October 19, 2023, the Houthis initiated the first batch of missiles and unmanned aircraft toward the occupied Palestinian territories, coinciding with the visit of Yemeni Army Chief Lieutenant General Saghir bin Aziz and a group of leaders to the Baklan Islands and coastal region of Medi in Hajjah Governorate. The U.S. Navy intercepted some projectiles in the Red Sea, clarifying that none were targeted at U.S. Navy ships. Saudi air defenses intercepted others, and a missile projectile from them landed in the area visited by the Chief of Staff. Notably, the Houthis did not claim responsibility for this incident, unlike subsequent attacks.

Amidst the escalating Israeli war on Gaza, Houthi attacks on the northern Gulf of Aqaba intensified, involving the hijacking of commercial ships affiliated with the Israeli government. The “Galaxy Leader” ship, flying the Bahamas flag to denote its nationality, was seized. Many sources indicate ownership by the UK-based Ray Car Carrier, with Israeli businessman Abraham Ungar reportedly participating in its ownership.<sup>2</sup> Although designed for car transport, the ship was empty during its voyage between Turkey and India and has been under hijacking since November 19, along with its crew that notably lacks any Israelis.

Early in November, the Houthis claimed responsibility for downing a U.S. unmanned aircraft, an MQ-9 Reaper, within the airspace of the Yemeni territorial sea under their control, south of the Red Sea. The drone was reportedly engaged in a reconnaissance mission following the heightened Houthi threats in the region. Concurrently, the U.S. Navy intercepted several missiles and unmanned aircraft during this period.

On November 26, in the Gulf of Aden, the destroyer USS Mason thwarted an attempt to hijack the oil tanker Central Park, affiliated with the London-based company, “Zodiac Marine,” a part of the Israeli trade group “Zodiac Group.” While the U.S. Navy attributed the hijack attempt to Somali pirates<sup>3</sup>, lingering uncertainties exist, and suspicions persist about potential Houthi involvement. The ongoing investigation has yet to yield conclusive results. A collaborative relationship between the Houthis and Somali militant groups is observed, primarily rooted in arms smuggling and illicit trade<sup>4</sup>. Notably, the Houthis lack the logistical capacity for direct piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, given its geographical distance from their controlled areas in the Red Sea.

Houthi assaults on commercial ships and Israel extended into the first week of December. The American and French navies intercepted various projectiles off the Yemeni coast in the Red Sea. In their latest declaration of threats on December 9, the Houthis announced their intention to target any ship destined for Israeli ports, regardless of nationality. This decision followed their claimed success in preventing Israeli ships from traversing the Red Sea.

A noticeable shift, like Houthi threats, is evident as attempts to hijack commercial ships decrease, giving way to an increase in missile and unmanned aircraft attacks. The justification provided for these attacks is their alleged affiliation with Israel. Despite more than 20 naval attacks, only two minor casualties were reported during four incidents involving missile attacks and unmanned suicide aircraft on December 3. These attempts targeted three commercial ships, namely Unity Explore, Number Nine, and Sophie-2, all designated for bulk shipping. The American destroyer USS Carney intercepted three of these attacks.

The Unity Explore ship endured three attacks, with one hit causing minor damage<sup>5</sup>. The second ship also sustained damage, resulting in minimal harm. In the following days, the Houthis acknowledged responsibility for these incidents, claiming that the targeted ships were Israeli, and that the ships refused to respond to the warnings of the Houthi naval forces.

Within this context, the Houthis employed deceptive tactics by issuing misleading orders and advice to ships through an anonymous entity. The British Maritime Trade Operations Authority reported that this entity impersonated Yemeni authorities, directing ships to alter their course toward the ports of Hodeidah. Over the past years of the conflict, the Iranian vessel Saviz, stationed off the coast of Eritrea, and its successor, the ship Behshad, were identified as playing a role in maritime intelligence in support of the Houthis. These suspicions were heightened when, in February 2022, the Houthis successfully hijacked the ship Rawabi, owned by the United Arab Emirates. The vessel was en route to a Saudi port in the Red Sea, carrying medical equipment intended for a military hospital on the Yemeni island of Socotra.

The anonymous entity mentioned earlier could potentially be the Regional Maritime Information Exchange Center in Sana'a. This center is one of three regional hubs for the exchange of maritime information, with others located in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) and Nairobi (Kenya). These centers facilitate information exchange with ships, their owners, operators and national contact points in the region. This is under the provisions of the Code of Conduct to Combat Maritime Piracy for the year 2009 (Djibouti Code of Conduct, 2009), which was updated in 2017, to include all non-traditional threats and became known as the Jeddah Code.



It is also possible that the Houthis are exploiting the Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) system of the Coast Guard forces under their control to convey threats to ships. This pattern of behavior has persisted throughout the conflict, spanning into the period leading up to the declaration of a humanitarian truce.

## **Second: Factors and Motivations Shaping the Threats Across the Bab al-Mandab Strait**

Numerous factors, both preceding and concurrent, underlie the Houthi threats on the Bab al-Mandab Strait. These factors are interwoven within diverse trends and contexts:

### **1. Internal Dynamics and Motivations**

The ongoing political process to extricate the country from the nine-year conflict is the main internal variable, which is intertwined with the threats raised by the Houthis on the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The Houthis aim to strengthen their negotiating position by employing various available strategies, including deliberately creating maritime conditions that significantly impact the interests of key players in the peace process, notably the United States, Britain, France and Saudi Arabia. These nations have displayed considerable flexibility in response to the successive conditions imposed by the Houthis for the continuation of the peace process, initiated by the humanitarian truce declared on April 2, 2023. This approach is evident in the restrained policies exhibited by these countries toward Houthi maritime activities, despite previous threats. Houthi leaders, including Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, have expressed dissatisfaction with the state of peace and non-war, issuing warnings of potential military escalation unless progress is made in the peace process, according to their group's perspectives.

Moreover, the humanitarian truce instigated discontent within areas under Houthi control due to persisting poor economic and service conditions, infringements on rights and freedoms, and the imposition of heightened financial levies, exacerbating the plight of both merchants and residents. The truce dismantled the Houthis' justifications regarding the sovereignty of these regions, revealing that their continuation of the war and associated obligations were behind the deteriorating conditions. This triggered public dissatisfaction, nearly escalating into a popular revolution. The Houthis, by neglecting the significant national commemoration of the September 26, 1962, revolution, further fueled discontent.

In light of these challenges, Houthi attacks on the interests of Israel and major powers in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden served as a diversion from pressing human rights demands. It also became a source of pride for the Houthis, positioning themselves as the sole military supporters of the Palestinians in Gaza against Israel. This stance created embarrassment for ruling Arab regimes before their populace. Simultaneously, the Houthi group sought to gain local and international legitimacy by maintaining this position, using it as a pretext to prolong the war.

A closely related variable to Houthi attacks on ships or attempts to hijack them is the circular issued by the International Maritime Organization to ship owners, operators and relevant regional information exchange centers. The circular urged them to cease dealings with the aforementioned Regional Information Exchange Center unless approval is obtained for the center of the same name in Aden, controlled by the Yemeni government. This development seemingly angered the

Houthi group, prompting them to assert their significance and demonstrate that they cannot be easily disregarded.

## 2- Regional and International Dynamics and Catalysts

The completion of Saudi/Iranian reconciliation, facilitated under Chinese auspices in March 2023, emerges as a closely connected variable to Houthi threats in the Red Sea. This connection is evident in Iran's potential exploitation of these threats and Saudi Arabia's commitment to fostering enduring reconciliation and supporting the Yemeni peace process. Amidst these dynamics, the Houthis made strategic maneuvers, utilizing the available leeway to advance their interests. It is crucial to consider the economic corridor project announced at the G20 Summit in New Delhi last September, which aims to connect India and Europe through the Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Additionally, the planned Ben Gurion Water Canal, linking the Gulf of Aqaba and the Mediterranean Sea, is intertwined with geopolitical calculations involving regional and international players, including Iran. Iran supports and negotiates with the Houthis, leveraging the Gaza war to secure its interests in these calculations.

At the same time, Israel's conflict with Gaza serves as a pivotal regional and international variable surrounding the Houthis' adversarial actions in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The Houthis connect their threats to Israel's actions against the Palestinian people, asserting that halting attacks on Israeli ships is contingent on ending aggression against Gaza. However, this demand has evolved to include allowing food entry into Gaza, as per the Houthi position announced on December<sup>9</sup>.

The stipulation now involves ceasing the targeting of any ship frequented by Israel's ports across the Red Sea to facilitate food deliveries to Gaza.

### **Third: Military and Security Ramifications of Threats Across the Bab al-Mandab Strait**

Houthi threats to maritime security on both sides of the Bab al-Mandab Strait escalated to an unforeseen level of peril with the initiation of the current humanitarian truce on April 2, 2022. The parties overseeing the peace process aimed to establish lasting and stable tranquility on both land and sea. This escalation surpassed the observations outlined in the aforementioned report of the Security Council Group of Experts, which noted the heightened tension in the Red Sea. The report, however, did not have sufficient time to thoroughly assess the tense situation on both sides of the strait following the October 19 attacks. This event marked the commencement of a cycle of maritime violence with a duration that hinges on the ability of the opposing parties — namely, the Houthis and Iran — to manage the current crisis within controllable bounds.

Amidst the ongoing cycle of Houthi maritime violence, both the military and security activities of the Houthis and the opposing government factions have witnessed significant escalation. The Houthis augmented the number of their forces along the coasts under their control, concentrating their naval efforts on Kamaran Island, situated opposite the port of Al-Salif in Hodeidah. Simultaneously, they bolstered critical approaches both south and north, leading to areas controlled by government naval forces.

These regions also experienced a parallel buildup, characterized by the movement of joint forces on the West Coast, the redeployment of Patriot (air defense) batteries by the UAE, and the direct engagement of its ally in the Presidential Command Council, Aidaroos Al-Zubaidi. Al-Zubaidi returned from Riyadh and met directly with naval and coastal defense commanders, followed by a meeting with the Minister of Defense, Lieutenant General Mohsen Al-Daari. Additionally, the minister's activities extended to the Hadhramaut Governorate on the Arabian Sea coast.

The proactive response to Houthi threats materialized through a series of successive meetings between the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Saghir bin Aziz, and American and Saudi military commanders. In early December, Bin Aziz and a high-level delegation visited Egypt, resulting in an agreement to enhance maritime training and implement joint security measures in the Red Sea. Egypt's response is particularly significant as it directly addresses Houthi threats targeting the Suez Canal. Egypt plays a multifaceted role, leveraging the independent presence of its naval forces in the Red Sea and their participation in the Joint Marine Task Force 153 alongside Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Britain. The United States also joined this force, which was announced in April 2022.

The Houthi threats have triggered a notable increase in foreign militarization around the Bab al-Mandab Strait and its surrounding areas, including Yemeni islands, including Socotra, Mayun (Perim), Hanish, Zuqar and Al-Zubair — all under government forces. These islands contribute to maritime security in the Red Sea and the Gulf regions, especially Aden, which is a crucial hub for the shipping industry.

Efforts by the Arab countries in the region to establish a maritime security system, including the Cooperation Council for Arab and African Countries bordering the Red Sea, seem to have diminished, if not vanished. This decline is potentially linked to the United States' intention to form a maritime security alliance involving 32 countries, as revealed on December 8. The coalition may include Israel, marking a departure from Israel's historical distance from collective security arrangements in the Red Sea. This emerging security trend aligns with evolving American political thought, explicitly naming Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Israel, in addition to the United States, as key participants in the coalition.

The inclusion of Israel in the regional security dynamics of the Red Sea Basin fundamentally alters the security equation, introducing a level of complexity that doesn't ensure lasting stability. This transformation is particularly unsettling for the Houthis, Iran's staunch regional ally, who perceive it as a direct threat to their political future and Iran's maritime ambitions in the region. This apprehension is heightened by the close ties between Israel and the UAE through the Abraham Treaty, positioning the latter, both internally and through Yemeni and regional allies, in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

The issue of militarization in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden presents a strategic opportunity handed to the United States and its international allies, led by Israel, the Houthis and Iran. The ramifications of this militarization extend beyond the security, sovereignty and interests of regional countries, impacting global security and international interests, where China holds a substantial presence.

China is poised to be targeted on two fronts: restrictions on its military presence in Djibouti and potential disruptions to its “Belt and Road” initiative. Consequently, China’s stance on any ensuing violence in the region may deviate from the norm, reflecting a nuanced position closely tied to the causes of the violence and its fundamental drivers.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper has covered three key security concerns arising from Houthi activity across the Bab al-Mandab Strait. These include the aspects representing these threats, their motivations, the diverse circumstances or variables surrounding them, and the security and military outcomes that have occurred or may occur. This encompasses potential impacts on established security arrangements and military positions.

The key takeaway from this analysis is that Houthi threats extend beyond mere expressions of solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza; they are linked to internal and external factors influencing their political standing. The paper underlines the convergence of conflicting forces in Yemen’s coastal regions and seas, suggesting a potential progression toward foreign militarization on both sides of the Bab al-Mandab Strait and Yemeni islands and coasts in the coming days. The repercussions of this militarization are anticipated to transcend regional security, interests and sovereignty, extending to global dimensions. The complexity of the interconnected interests involved, encompassing regional countries, Iran and China, underscores the far-reaching implications of these developments.



## Resources:

1. Final report of the Group of Experts on Yemen established under Security Council resolution 2140 (2014), Security Council, November 2, 2023: pp. 21, 22.
2. From the indicated sources, see: Abby Williams, “Ships Divert after Galaxy Leader Hijacking; Houthis Release Footage of Seizure,” Daily Cargo News, 11/22/2023, accessed 12/8/2023, at: <https://bitly.ws/3558D>
3. Raul (Pete) Pedrozo, “Securing the Maritime Domain in the Red Sea”, Lieber Institute West Point, 8/12 2023, accessed 10/12/2023, at: <https://bitly.ws/35c2j>
4. Security Council, previous reference: p. 35.
5. See: Houthi Attacks on Commercial Shipping in International Water Continue, U.S. Central Command, 3/12/2023, accessed 9/12/2023, at: <https://bitly.ws/35i2b>
6. For more on this, see: Non-traditional security threats in the western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden: A study in developing confrontation mechanisms, Ali Al-Dhahab, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Doha - Qatar, 1st edition, December 2021, available at the following link: <https://bitly.ws/3564x>
7. The Houthis and the War on Gaza: War and Employment, Al Mokha Center for Studies, November 2023, available at the following link: <https://bitly.ws/35gxp>
8. Ministry of Transport in Aden, where the alternative regional center is located, private source, November 2023.
9. Some say that the “Al-Aqsa Flood” operation, which Hamas carried out on October 7, 2023, was a trap that led to the implementation of the two projects referred to in the text, and this is what this paper does not agree with, because this proposal is malicious and goes beyond a history of struggle, and the intelligence capabilities of Hamas, and we can say that the war is directed in this direction, but its results are not guaranteed.
10. Security Council, previous reference: p. 23.
11. For more on this squad, see: CTF 153: Red Sea Maritime Security, accessed 9/12/2023, at: <https://bitly.ws/35iil>

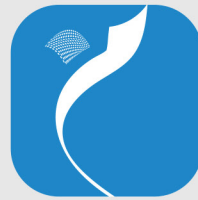


12. The final report of the expert group, issued in November 2023, indicated what might establish this: As there is government military activity on Zubair Island, there is corresponding activity by the Houthis on Kamaran Island, which is at a transverse distance, slanting south, of 42 miles. See: Security Council, previous reference: p. 23.

13. This alliance may be an expansion of membership in Joint Maritime Task Force 153, or it may be a temporary alliance similar to the alliances that arose during the rise of piracy on ships in the Gulf of Aden, during the first decade of this century.

14. Containing the Houthi Militias in Yemen: Problem[s] and Options Confronting Policies, Michael Knights, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, on 12/5/2023, available at the following link: <https://bitly.ws/35hnb>

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