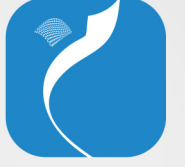


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# Exploring Russia's Role in the Red Sea Conflicts: Background and Key Dimensions

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# Exploring Russia's Role in the Red Sea Conflicts: Background and Key Dimensions

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February - 2025



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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## Introduction

Amid efforts to balance Western pressure in Ukraine, Russia's relationship with the Houthi group has visibly escalated. This shift is driven by geopolitical necessities, as Russia seeks to maintain its regional influence. Moscow views the Houthis, first, as a tool to serve its interests in dealings with Western powers and, second, as a propaganda asset for domestic audiences. The Kremlin portrays Houthi attacks in the Red Sea as a microcosm of Western dominance in the international system — an assertion that such developments are a consequence of Russia's war in Ukraine, which it considers a turning point toward creating a new, multipolar world order.

Furthermore, through its multifaceted ties with Iran's regional proxies, Russia aims to strengthen its strategic position in the region by deepening cooperation with Tehran, supporting anti-Western forces and securing its role in global politics. Russia also seeks to demonstrate its influence over key energy routes. The Russia-Houthi relationship has a distinct military-technical character, with potential arms supplies and advisory support, although many details of these operations remain classified.

The regional fallout from the rapid collapse of Syria's former regime, a key Russian ally, has pushed Moscow to adopt a series of strategic hedging measures to preserve its influence in the Middle East. This includes expanding influence in other nations, increasing cooperation with allies, leveraging military deterrence and strengthening economic and military partnerships with countries, such as Iran and China.

This paper aims to analyze Russia's potential role in Houthi attacks on international shipping, its provision of advanced military technology to the group, Moscow's broader objectives, as well as the implications of this cooperation for regional security. Additionally, it will assess the impact of these developments on Russia's relations with major regional powers.

### How the War in Ukraine Reshaped Russia's Stance on the Yemeni Crisis

Moscow maintained a consistent position on Yemen until Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, which coincided with the deterioration of its relations with the West due to Western support for Ukraine against Russia. These developments pushed Moscow to seek new allies to support its anti-Western agenda, finding a strategic partner in Iran — a country that supplied Russia with drones and ammunition for its war. Russia openly admired Tehran's defiance of Western sanctions despite decades of economic blockade.

Moscow also saw Iran's regional proxies, including the Houthis, as potential partners in a global anti-Western alliance, provided these groups aligned with Kremlin policies. A key indicator of this tactical alignment emerged on February 21, 2022 — just three days before Russia invaded Ukraine — when the Houthis publicly endorsed Russia's recognition of the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. This move reflected a shared interest in challenging Western influence<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Why is the Kremlin getting closer to the Yemeni rebels?, Ruslan Suleimanov, exclusive.kz, on: 12/9/2024, available at the following link: <https://linkshortcut.com/SiSaE>

The Houthi attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea and their strikes against Israeli interests became one of the most unexpected developments in the Middle East conflicts over the past year. These actions garnered notable Russian support, marking a shift in Moscow's stance toward Yemen. Previously, Russia viewed the Houthis as a "limited threat" to their neighbors. However, as the U.S.-led international coalition struggled to halt Houthi attacks, Moscow seized the opportunity to accuse Washington of fueling regional instability — while leveraging the situation to expand its own geopolitical influence.

Russia's support wasn't just political; Moscow turned the crisis into an economic bargaining chip. The Houthi attacks disrupted key maritime trade routes, preventing a sharp decline in global oil prices, which, in turn, benefited Russia, amid Western sanctions. In this way, Russia weaponized the Red Sea crisis to expose America's declining dominance and test the West's ability to protect its interests in global conflict zones.

According to Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin<sup>2</sup>, the Houthi attacks in Yemen are not just isolated military operations but part of a broader geopolitical struggle to free the region from Western hegemony. Dugin argues that, by draining Western economies, disrupting maritime trade routes and exposing weaknesses in Western missile defense systems, the Houthis gain strategic value as an unconventional Russian partner in the battle to reshape the global order.

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2. An influential Russian philosopher in Kremlin circles.

Alexander Dugin's support for the Houthis dates back several years. In a 2016 interview with the conservative Russian channel Tsargrad TV, he argued that the "objective alliance" between Russia and Shiite forces, including the Houthis, stems from their shared opposition to the "Atlantic civilization", represented by the Western-Sunni alliance, led by Saudi Arabia.

In Dugin's view, the Houthis embody "Arabian Eurasianism" — a land-based resistance force countering Western maritime hegemony. This perspective places the Houthis and Russia on the same front line against common adversaries, including Al-Qaeda and the Saudi-backed government of President Hadi. Dugin has repeatedly stressed that Russia must adopt an openly hostile policy toward the Houthis' enemies, arguing that a Houthi victory — as a Shiite stronghold in southern Arabia — would pave the way for direct Russian influence in one of the world's most strategic regions.

Thus, the Kremlin's support for the Houthis aligns with Dugin's ideological vision, which views the Yemeni conflict as a battleground for a "clash of civilizations". In this framework, weakening Western-aligned forces and redrawing regional alliances outside Western norms is a strategic priority<sup>3</sup>.

After the Houthis escalated their Red Sea attacks, Dugin made a striking statement, accusing the West of "crossing all red lines" and urging Russia to respond strategically by arming U.S. adversaries in the Middle East.

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3. Alexander Dugin: In Yemen and everywhere else, Shiites always find themselves on the same side of the barricades with Russia, Tsargrad website, on: 11/30/2016, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/mQzkLR>

He explicitly called for providing Hezbollah and the Houthis with advanced weaponry — including tactical nuclear weapons — arguing that the confrontation with the West had entered a critical phase requiring unconventional measures<sup>4</sup>.

At the same time, analysts have pointed to a fundamental shift in Russia's Yemen policy over the past two years, characterized by increased military cooperation with the Houthis. Recent reports from United Nations Security Council experts have documented attempts to smuggle Russian weapons into Yemen, including: Kornet 9M133 laser-guided anti-tank missiles, AKS-20U assault rifles and other advanced weapons bearing Russian production markings

Observers interpret these developments as part of a broader Russian strategy to expand its influence in Middle Eastern conflict zones by supporting factions opposed to Western dominance. UN reports also highlight a notable rise in Russian arms transfers to Yemen since early 2022, confirming that Moscow has shifted from passively monitoring the Yemeni crisis to actively participating in it<sup>5</sup>.

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4. Philosopher Dugin calls for arming U.S. enemies in the Middle East, Ru newspaper, on: 6/28/2024, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/yfgubc3>

5. In cooperation with Russia, we can strangle America, Meduza website, on: 11/11/2024, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/gGI9Gaw>



## The Fall of the Assad Regime: A Major Geopolitical Loss

With the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and the destruction of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran's regional strategy — centered around the so-called “Axis of Resistance”<sup>6</sup> — faced intense criticism. Some analysts dismissed it as nothing more than a propaganda illusion aimed at bolstering Iran's prestige.

These developments also exposed the fragility of Iranian influence, particularly in light of Russia's geopolitical vision, which perceives Iran as a crucial bridge connecting the Middle East to Central Asia and Russia. According to Alexander Dugin, Russian-Iranian cooperation in energy and defense forms a key pillar of his “Greater Eurasian” strategy — a vision that seeks to replace U.S. unipolar dominance with a multipolar world order.

## Russian Concerns Over the Collapse of the Iranian Axis

Moscow understands that the fall of the Syrian regime has repercussions for Iran, threatening its geopolitical interests in the region. This is particularly concerning in light of Russia's security worries along its southern borders in the Caucasus, a soft underbelly for Moscow, and the growing Turkish influence from the Black Sea to the Caspian, especially following Ankara's recent gains in Nagorno-Karabakh and Syria.

Additionally, Russia fears the “revolutionary contagion” might spread to its own territory, which historically has driven Moscow — whether during the Tsarist or Soviet eras — to adopt various strategies to maintain internal stability.

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6. A concept that refers to a wide area that contains some countries located in the heart of Eurasia, a strategic region that combines Europe and Asia, and includes countries, such as Russia, China, Iran and others.

An example of that in history include the “Holy Alliance”<sup>7</sup>, proposed by Tsar Alexander I with major European powers (Austria and Prussia) after Napoleon’s defeat, aimed at preserving monarchical systems in Europe and preventing the spread of revolutionary ideas across Europe in the 19th century. Another example is the “Brezhnev Doctrine” in the Soviet era, which justified military intervention to suppress revolutions in Eastern Bloc countries (such as Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968).

As a result, both Moscow and Tehran hastened to sign a strategic partnership agreement to strengthen their alliance against common threats and minimize the losses resulting from the decline of influence in Syria.

The objectives of Moscow in this agreement include:

- **Containing Turkish Influence:** Countering Turkey’s expansion in the Caucasus and the Middle East.
- **Stabilizing the Iranian Regime:** Ensuring Tehran remains a key ally in the face of Western sanctions.
- **Enhancing Military-Technological Cooperation:** This could involve supporting allied groups, such as the Houthis, by supplying advanced weapons (e.g., hypersonic missiles) or transferring other military industrial expertise, potentially shifting the balance of power in certain regions, like the Red Sea.

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7. How did the Russian Tsar Alexander I establish the “Holy Alliance”?; the website of the History of the Russian Federation, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/RtXR2>

Thus, the dual threat — U.S. and Israeli pressure on Iran's nuclear program, alongside Russia's international isolation — accelerated the integration between Moscow and Tehran. This culminated in the strategic partnership agreement of 2025, signed just days before Donald Trump's inauguration as U.S. president, covering all fields of bilateral cooperation, from energy to military technology, according to the Iranian ambassador in Moscow<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, it can be said that Russia's deepening relationship with the Houthis is part of a broader strategy to counter regional losses. This is occurring against the backdrop of the geopolitical decline of Russia and Iran after the fall of the Assad regime. As part of a joint strategy with Tehran, they are seeking to compensate for their losses by creating new points of tension that disrupt their adversaries and redefine spheres of influence. This shift reflects a transition in Russia's approach from political support to active military backing, as a response to the erosion of its traditional influence in the Middle East.

### **Military-Technical Cooperation Between Moscow and the Houthis**

Amid the deterioration of relations between both Iran and Russia on one hand and the West on the other, Russian-Iranian military cooperation has notably developed, particularly after the expiration of the international sanctions imposed on Iran by the United Nations Security Council resolutions.

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8. See: Соглашение подписано: что даст России и Ирану стратегическое партнерство, БАЛМАСОВ Сергей, ТАСС, 17 января 2025, <https://goo.su/ILX3O9>. (English translation: Agreement signed: What will strategic partnership give Russia and Iran, Balmasov, S., TASS, Russian News Agency, January 17, 2025.)

This cooperation culminated in the signing of the strategic partnership agreement between the two countries on January 17, 2025, marking the peak of bilateral coordination in defense and technology sectors.

### **Regional and International Context**

Following remarks by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who praised the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive to reclaim Ukrainian territories, the “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” in the Gaza Strip took place on October 7, 2023, which provided Moscow with a strategic opportunity. The Israeli war against Gaza, along with its security and economic repercussions, regionally and internationally, allowed Russia to enhance its influence by prolonging the conflict, aligning with its broader strategic objectives, including:

- Occupying Western allies and draining their resources.
- Creating a disruptive environment that weakens the West’s ability to focus on the Ukrainian issue.

Although Moscow was not the primary driver of the “Axis of Resistance”, which includes Iran and its allies in the region, it sought to encourage and enhance the military capabilities of these forces to apply more pressure on the United States and its allies in the Middle East. This support went beyond political rhetoric and manifested in concrete steps, particularly military aid to the Houthis, according to Russian media reports.

The Houthis were supplied with multipurpose short-range missiles, which are hard to detect and can be mounted on light boats, enhancing their ability to target ships or installations, especially after repeated flights of the Russian Antonov 124-100 aircraft to major Iranian airports, such as Mehrabad International Airport<sup>9</sup>.

The Antonov 124-100 (Ruslan) is a heavy military transport aircraft, with a capacity of up to 120 tons, and it can fly distances of up to 4,800 kilometers with maximum load<sup>10</sup>.

### **Military Context: Ruslan Exercises and their Timing with Red Sea Events**

In December 2024, the Russian Ministry of Defense conducted unprecedented military exercises involving seven heavy transport aircraft, specifically the Antonov 124-100 (Ruslan)<sup>11</sup>, which is the cornerstone of Russia's strategic airlift capability. These exercises coincided with escalating tensions in the Red Sea, where Houthi forces launched attacks on commercial ships, raising questions about Moscow's role in enhancing the Houthis' military capabilities.

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9. Houthis enter into an alliance with the Russian Federation. They target American ships and close the Red Sea to them, on: 2/23/2024, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/UiBLM>

10. Seven giant "Ruslan" aircraft take off simultaneously for the first time during exercises, Russia Today International (Arabic translated into English), on: 12/16/2024, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/peJ3Jz>

11. The Ministry of Defense conducted exercises with seven heavy aircraft of the "Ruslan" type for the first time, Izvestia Gazeta, on: 12/16/2024, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/1VXEUTz>

## Ruslan Flights to Iran: Mysterious Shipments Concurrent with Red Sea Events

According to the “Barsineh” Iranian website<sup>12</sup>, a Ruslan Antonov landed at Mehrabad International Airport in August 2024, after a similar flight to Isfahan the previous month. Iranian reports indicated that previous shipments included Yak-130 training aircraft<sup>13</sup>, equipped with infrared technology, with expectations for more-advanced fighter jets to be delivered in the future. While the exact nature of the recent shipments has not been disclosed, the Russian-Iranian secrecy has fueled speculation that advanced weapons could eventually be transferred to the Houthis.

## Political Discourse and Experts: Between Encouragement and Denial

During a Soloviev Live program on Vesti FM, the expert Pavel Gostrine asserted that Russia could use the Houthis as allies, suggesting that northern Yemen could become a stronghold for Moscow's influence in the region<sup>14</sup>. He called for moving beyond political rhetoric to concrete steps, such as supplying the Houthis with weapons that would enable them to counter U.S. forces.

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12. A giant Russian transport plane lands in Mehrabad. What is the cargo that Antonov transported to Iran?, Iranian Parsineh website, on: 2/18/2024, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/7XnBap0>

13. The Russian Antonov-124 plane. The giant plane in the world arrived in Tehran, War Information Channel, on: 8/15/2024, available at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBb2W0IM2dw>

14. Expert: Russia may use the Houthis as allies, Smotrim, on: 1/14/2024, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/oH47q>

## Russian Official Response

The Kremlin's official spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, denied reports accusing Russia of transferring satellite data to the Houthis through the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. He labeled these claims as "false"<sup>15</sup>.

## Media Leaks: Evidence of Secret Cooperation

In October 2024, The Wall Street Journal revealed that Viktor Bout, a notorious Russian arms dealer, had returned to broker a deal for small arms with the Houthis. Representatives from the group visited Moscow under the guise of purchasing pesticides and toured the Lada car factory<sup>16</sup>. The CNN network connected Russia's plans to supply missiles to the Houthis in July 2024 with its desire to retaliate against U.S. support for Ukraine, though the deal was canceled after Saudi warnings<sup>17</sup>.

Viktor Bout referred to the article published by the American newspaper during an interview with REN TV, calling it a "gift" from the West to Russian President Vladimir Putin on his birthday. He emphasized that the article was based on speculation rather than concrete facts. However, he confirmed in the interview that the Houthis are allies of Russia and require support because, in his view, they are highly effective in countering American drone surveillance.

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15. Kremlin calls WSJ report on Russian satellite data transfer to Houthis false, PFK, 10/25/2024, available at: <https://goo.su/H2GHRW>

16. See: Putin's 'Merchant of Death' Is Back in the Arms Business. This Time Selling to the Houthis, The Wall Street Journal, at: 7. 10. 2024, at <https://goo.su/CHZTc0F>

17. Reuters: Russia is holding secret negotiations with the Yemeni Houthis about supplying them with anti-ship missiles with Iranian mediation and participation, Meduza, on: 25/9/2024, available at the following link:<https://linksshortcut.com/EDRAL>

According to Bout, the more drones the Houthis shoot down, the fewer opportunities the United States has to use these drones against Russia in the Black Sea<sup>18</sup>. Thus, despite Russia's official denials, the recent Houthi attacks on Israel and international shipping have confirmed the validity of these reports.

### **Russian Cooperation with the Houthis: A Shift from Neutrality to Alignment**

It has become increasingly difficult for the Kremlin to maintain its narrative of “neutrality” in the Yemeni conflict, especially after international reports revealed Russia's growing role in militarily and technically supporting the Houthis, particularly with the escalation of their attacks on ships in the Red Sea and Israel. This shift seems to be the result of deepening strategic partnership with Iran, which reached its peak after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, where Tehran became a key partner in supplying Moscow with drones and missiles.

### **Factors Behind the Shift: Partnership with Iran and Military Support**

#### **1. The Iranian-Russian Alliance:**

Military cooperation between Moscow and Tehran has become a tool to strengthen their joint influence, using Iran as a channel to transfer Russian weapons to the Houthis.

- The presence of Russian military advisors in Sana'a has intensified, according to Western intelligence reports<sup>19</sup>.

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18. Russian relations with the Houthi group within the framework of the geopolitical struggle over the West, Dr. Youssef Marai, Journal of Iranian Studies, eighth year, issue 20, October 2024: p. 103.

19. Intelligence reveals the mission of Russian officers recently deployed in Yemen to help the Houthis, Ma'rib Press, on: 8/4/2024, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/SWPz1Ej>



## 2. Russian Media Narrative:

- Kremlin-affiliated media platforms, such as Russia Today and Sputnik, have openly discussed the “legitimacy” of Houthi demands, without ruling out the possibility of supplying them with weapons, marking a clear shift from the earlier diplomatic stance.

### Historical Context: From Mediation to Bias

Moscow maintained a seemingly neutral stance during Operation Decisive Storm, the military campaign launched by Saudi Arabia against the Houthis, merely calling for a “ceasefire,”<sup>20</sup> despite its objections to external intervention in Yemen. Over the years, Russia consistently advocated for a “comprehensive Yemeni dialogue” and hosted representatives from all parties involved. However, meetings with the Houthis have significantly increased since 2023, with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and President Putin’s special envoy to the Middle East, Mikhail Bogdanov, meeting with Houthi representatives around four times within a year and a half<sup>21</sup>, compared to sporadic meetings with other parties. This indicates that Moscow can no longer hide its gradual bias toward the Houthis, which threatens its credibility as a neutral mediator in the Yemeni issue.

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20. Commentary by the Russian Foreign Ministry on the situation in Yemen, the official website of the Russian Foreign Ministry, on 3/26/2015, available at the following link: [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1506197/](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1506197/)

21. Since the beginning of the Red Sea events, three official delegations have visited Moscow. Two visits were covered on the official website of the Russian Foreign Ministry.

- The first was on January 25, 2024, see the following link: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/ye/1927752/>

- The second was on July 2, 2024, see the following link: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/ye/1960550/>

- The third visit was covered in many news agencies and websites, under the title “Houthis visit Moscow and present an interesting proposal”, see the following link: <https://goo.su/TZ5Zs>

- In addition to meeting the Russian President’s envoy For the Middle East, Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdul Salam in Muscat in July of the same year, see the following link: <https://yemeneco.org/archives/84815>

**This shift reflects the Kremlin's desire to:**

- Enhance its influence in the region through alliances with unconventional actors.
- Exploit regional conflicts to achieve geopolitical gains in its competition with the West.

Thus, Russia is transitioning from a stabilizing player to an active participant in complicating the Yemeni situation.

**From Communism to Militias: A Strategic Shift**

In the 1960s, the Soviet Union supported Yemeni revolutionaries by exporting an ideological model based on Marxism, aiming to build a modern state under the socialist framework. In the 2020s, Russia is redefining its alliances in Yemen by supporting the Houthi group, which seeks to undermine state institutions in favor of a sectarian and dynastic system. Russia is employing various tools, including arms supplies and political support, through a tripartite alliance (Moscow + Tehran + Houthis).

**Indicators of Diminishing Influence: From “Soft Power” to “Hard Power”**

This shift from ideological diplomacy to military diplomacy reflects the decline of Russia's global influence, where Moscow has been forced to rely on:

- Fragile alliances with unconventional actors, such as sectarian militias, instead of promoting its political or economic model.
- Coordination with Iran, which has become a central partner in managing regional crises, such as the Ukrainian conflict, where Tehran supplied Moscow with drones to support its attacks on Ukraine.

Despite the external appearance of a Russian-Iranian alliance, Moscow's support for the Houthis does not necessarily reflect an ideological alignment with Tehran<sup>22</sup>. Instead, it is a strategic response to:

- **Western isolation:** Russia is attempting to compensate for its loss of traditional influence by creating parallel crises that distract its Western allies (such as disrupting shipping in the Red Sea).
- **The war in Ukraine:** Russia seeks to use the Houthis as a tool to drain American resources in the Middle East, in retaliation for Western support of Kyiv.

The increasing context of solidarity and military cooperation between Russia and Iran, demonstrated by Tehran's active role in the Ukrainian conflict, significantly contributes to understanding the evolving nature of the relationship between Moscow and the Houthis. However, the growing support that Russia is providing to the Houthis is more closely tied to its broader animosity with the United States and other Western nations than it is to the cohesion or solidarity between Moscow and Tehran.

This shift indicates that Russia is no longer able to export a compelling model, like the Soviet Union did, and has instead become a player that relies on:

- Exporting chaos as a substitute for civilizational projects.
- Short-term alliances with disruptive entities, weakening its position as a great power capable of leading the international system.

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22. Russian relations with the Houthi group in the context of the geopolitical struggle over the West. See previous source.

This transformation is not just a tactical shift; it is a sign of a deeper crisis in Russia's vision, making its global influence hostage to its ability to prolong conflicts, rather than resolve them.

## Prospects of the Relationship and Its Implications for Moscow

It is evident that Moscow is facing significant challenges in its relationship with the Houthis. From a geopolitical standpoint, supplying advanced weapons to the Houthis is seen as a reckless and hostile action toward the Gulf neighbors of the Houthis. In other words, Russia's choice to establish ties with a poor and unstable faction in Sana'a could jeopardize its long-established relations with stable and prosperous countries, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

This issue is further complicated by the fact that some Gulf countries have become a safe haven for Russian capital, especially after unprecedented Western sanctions against Russia<sup>23</sup>. Saudi Arabia, which occasionally hints at the possibility of halting cooperation with Moscow in energy matters, plays a crucial role in Russian decision-making when it comes to supplying advanced weaponry to the Houthis<sup>24</sup>.

Through its rapprochement with the Houthis, Russia aims to bolster its strategic influence in opposition to Saudi Arabia and gain leverage over the Houthis, which could change the course of the conflict should the Houthis decide to threaten Saudi Arabia again.

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23. The Last Dock: How the UAE Became a Safe Haven for Rich Russians, TRT на русском, on: 18/3/2022, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/3Q6uDL1>

24. The Houthis and Russia in Yemen: Why Do Their Growing Relations Matter?, Francesco D'Alessio Scavi, Akhbar Al-Arab Newspaper, on: 5/12/2024, available at the following link: <https://linksshortcut.com/gUwcv>

Meanwhile, Riyadh and Washington continue discussions about a potential defense treaty, which might be signed if Trump returns to the White House. These dynamics could lead to a reduction of Russia's influence in the Gulf region, underscoring the importance of the geopolitical transformations in the area. At the same time, it seems that Moscow has opted for an approach of ambiguity in its relations with the Houthis. The following are some of the implications and opportunities that this relationship offers to Moscow:

**1. Distraction Strategy:** If the Kremlin believes that distracting the Houthis in the Red Sea will divert Western efforts and give Russia some breathing room in Ukraine, it is likely that Russia will seek innovative ways to support the group while minimizing potential diplomatic backlash from Gulf countries. It could rely on forms of indirect assistance that it can plausibly deny, such as supplying Iran with weapons that will eventually reach the Houthis<sup>25</sup>.

**2. Russia's Flexible Definition of Terrorism:** The Kremlin's relationship with a group classified as a terrorist organization is unconventional in some respects. However, Russia has demonstrated significant flexibility in defining terrorism<sup>26</sup>, having recently removed the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations. Furthermore, the shared vision of the future and the cooperation between Russia and the Houthis, amid declining U.S. influence, could provide sufficient grounds for their partnership.

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25. Francesco D'Alessio Scavi, *The Houthis and Russia in Yemen*. See previous source.

26. Putin Signs Law Allowing the Taliban to Be Removed from the List of Banned Organizations, Interfax, on: 28/12/2024, available at the following link: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/1001102>

**Advanced Arms Deals:** The potential for advanced arms deals between Russia and Sanaa could change the game rules, although there remains uncertainty surrounding this. It is clear that the strengthening of ties between the Kremlin and the Houthis is part of the geopolitical pressures linking Russia to Iran.

However, Moscow must consider its core priorities, such as energy and the economy, which could impact its regional strategies. According to Andrei Ontikov, an expert on Middle Eastern affairs, Russia's support for any party in conflict with the U.S., including Ansar Allah, is currently governed by specific calculations and constraints. These, however, are likely to change based on shifts in the ongoing Western conflict, particularly in light of the current situation with Ukraine<sup>27</sup>.

## Summary

Amid escalating tensions with the West and the delegation of Ukraine to strike deep Russian territory, Moscow is increasingly relying on Houthi support in Yemen to target Western interests at key maritime choke points. This is aimed at diverting NATO's attention from Ukraine and inflicting economic losses on the West.

Despite attempts by the Kremlin to maintain a diplomatic balance with Yemeni factions, such as the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and Gulf countries, its covert cooperation with the Houthis signals a shift toward bias, threatening its relationship with Riyadh.

This is particularly concerning given the potential reduction in Saudi cooperation within OPEC+ or the signing of a defense agreement with the U.S. Additionally, Moscow has leveraged the Red Sea crisis to

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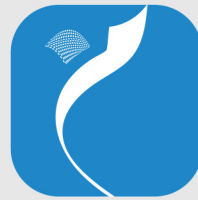
27. Will Moscow provide advanced weapons to Hezbollah? Fahim Al-Sourani, Al Jazeera Net, 7/22/2024, available at the following link: <https://goo.su/Tr2Fp>

promote alternative logistics routes, such as the North-South corridor with Iran, the Eurasian land route with China, as well as the Russian Northern Sea Route.

Moscow also uses the Houthis to threaten the security of maritime passages, damaging U.S. interests and its global standing. Furthermore, Russia views the Houthis as a bargaining chip against Saudi Arabia, which has significant influence over energy prices.

Russia's strategy has shifted from an ideological focus to fragile alliances with sectarian militias, attempting to compensate for its declining global influence by exporting chaos and exploiting conflicts for short-term gains, which deepens geopolitical complexities both in the region and globally.

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