



The Hormuz Model at Bab al-Mandab: Using the Taiz Highlands to Sustain the Houthi Maritime Threat

Study



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Introduction

The Bab al-Mandab Strait is one of the most strategically significant maritime passages for international trade. Attacks by Houthi militias over recent years in the southern Red Sea, the strait, and the Gulf of Aden have shown that maritime security in this vital region depends on more than direct control of the strait and its adjacent coastline. Geographical, military, and political considerations overlap, extending beyond the maritime domain into adjoining land areas. The Houthis' seizure of the Bab al-Mandab Strait and its adjacent coastline in September 2026, followed by their expansion into the mountains overlooking the strait, has revealed the importance of the highlands of western and southwestern Taiz. Their significance lies in their location, geographical characteristics, geopolitical influence, and connections to a broader geographical area encompassing territory under the group's control.

Statements by Yemeni and regional sources have reflected a tendency to link the liberation of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, Mayun Island, and the adjacent coastal areas by Yemeni government forces and the Coalition to Support Legitimacy with the elimination of the Houthis' ability to threaten international trade and global energy supplies passing through the strait.



This raises a central question: to what extent would regaining control of the strait and its surroundings be sufficient to contain the maritime threat, given continued Houthi control over the mountainous highlands of Taiz Governorate and the threat to navigational security posed by military capabilities positioned further inland?

This paper examines how the geopolitical characteristics of the highlands of western and southwestern Taiz—including their strategic location and overland connections to Houthi-controlled areas—could strengthen the group’s ability to sustain its maritime threat. It analyses how geography could interact with military, logistical, and information capabilities, and the extent to which the spatial advantages of the land domain can translate into strategic effects on the security of navigation through the Bab al-Mandab Strait. It draws on Iran’s experience in using the geography of the Strait of Hormuz as a comparative framework for understanding patterns of pressure on maritime passages. The paper also examines the potential offered by the Taiz highlands and its implications for navigational security in the southern Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and the Gulf of Aden.

Linking Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab in Iran's Pressure Strategy

Iran's strategy places considerable importance on the Bab al-Mandab Strait¹. During 2026, its position has shifted from threatening to close the strait to asking the Houthis to prepare to disrupt navigation through it, amid rising tensions with the United States. This development points to the strait's growing role in Iran's regional pressure calculations, as a maritime passage where threats can have repercussions beyond Yemen, affecting international trade, energy supplies, and maritime security more broadly.

On 5 April, Ali Akbar Velayati, an adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader, linked the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab, stating that "the unified command room of the resistance front views Bab al-Mandab as it views Hormuz." The statement reflects an Iranian agenda to use both straits, through its Houthi proxy, as part of a single pressure equation targeting global trade and energy routes.²

1. For more information, see :Dr .Ismail Al-Suhaili ,*Drivers of the Continuation of the Current Armed Conflict in Yemen* ,Mokha Center for Strategic Studies ,January ,2024 available at :<https://u.pw/s5aCiL>

2. Anadolu Agency“ ,Following Trump's Threats ,Iran Signals the Possibility of Closing Bab al-Mandab Alongside the Strait of Hormuz ”,April ,2026 ,5 available at :<https://u.pw/b842Q6>

The rhetoric subsequently intensified. On 16 July, Reuters reported that Iran had asked the Houthis to prepare to close Bab al-Mandab if the United States targeted Iran's electricity grid infrastructure. Citing two Iranian sources and a regional source, the agency reported that the idea had been discussed within the Iranian leadership and communicated to the Houthis. This suggests that the use of the strait had moved beyond political threats towards preparations to employ it in a wider confrontation.³

The escalation reached its peak on 10 September, when Reuters cited Yemeni, Iranian, and regional sources as saying that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had provided guidance and participated directly in the Houthi advance along the Red Sea coast and their capture of Mokha and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The sources also said that Tehran had encouraged an escalation of attacks against Saudi Arabia and pledged further funding, weapons, and experts.⁴

3. Reuters“ ,Sources :Iran Asked the Houthis to Close Bab al-Mandab if the United States Bombed the Power Grid ”,July ,2026 ,16 available at :<https://www.reuters.com/ar/world/TRJIBGVCDJMRNKULMHDBQWDRDU/16-07-2026->

4. Reuters“ ,Sources :Iranian Weapons and Advice Helped the Houthis in Yemen Seize Control of Mokha ”,September ,2026 ,10 available at :<https://www.reuters.com/ar/world/C6ZTMNISNRLNBNGW6Q2B7HWZHY/10-09-2026->



These indicators point to an Iranian strategic direction towards expanding its instruments of maritime pressure to include Bab al-Mandab alongside Hormuz, creating what can be described as an “interlinking of the two straits.” By this, we mean a shift from treating the straits as separate theatres of crisis to viewing them as parts of an interconnected regional pressure equation, in which threats to one can reinforce the effects of threats to the other. This connection goes beyond simultaneous threats to encompass their reciprocal effects on energy export options and maritime navigation.

This interlinking has become unmistakable. Disruption to navigation in Hormuz caused by Iranian armed attacks on shipping has pushed energy-exporting countries towards alternative routes. Saudi Arabia's East–West pipeline, which connects oilfields in the Eastern Province to the Red Sea port of Yanbu, emerged as a suitable alternative.

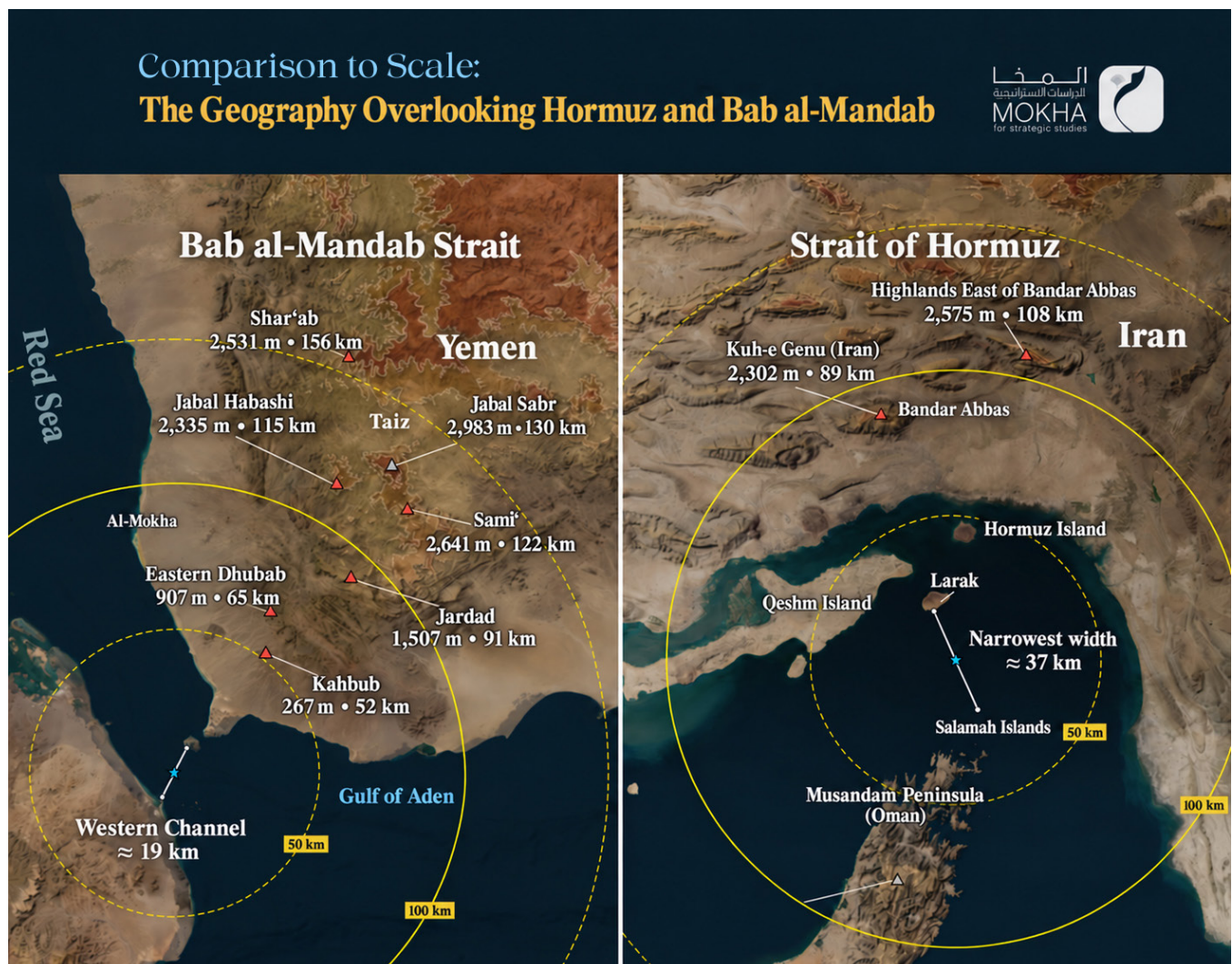
Yet Houthi attacks on shipping through Bab al-Mandab have reduced the viability of this route for shipments to Asian markets. Threats to both passages have thus limited the ability of Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states to compensate for disruption in one by using the other. They have also extended Iranian pressure to alternative energy export routes, alongside international trade routes and maritime security.

The Houthis' seizure in September of the western coast and the area surrounding Bab al-Mandab—including the city and port of Mokha and the Hanish archipelago, extending to Dhubab and Mayun Island at the heart of the strait—marked a turning point in the strategy of interlinking the two straits.⁵

5. BBC Arabic” ,Houthis Reach Bab al-Mandab :Why Are the Areas They Seized Important “?September ,2026 ,11available at :<https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/c3wj5050v5no>

The Hormuz Highlands as an Inspiring Model for the Houthis

Iran's disruption of the Strait of Hormuz offers an important model for understanding how mountainous geography can become a strategic resource in asymmetric conflicts. Having lost the ability to maintain a direct military presence in the strait and exercise firm control over it as a result of US military operations, Iran compensated by adopting an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy⁶.



6. For more information on this military strategy, see: *Al Jundi Journal* UAE, (The Impact of the Anti-Access/Area Denial Strategy on Global Security, January, 2021, 1 available at: <https://u.pw/VSupPT>.

This strategy centres on establishing a complex defensive and offensive system that makes the cost of an adversary's entry into a given geographical area prohibitively high, forcing it to retreat. This was clearly demonstrated by combining the mountainous terrain overlooking the strait with missile capabilities, drones, and explosive-laden boats⁷ to restrict freedom of passage, sustain threats to trade and energy flows, and increase strategic pressure on adversaries and enemies.

The Zagros Mountains overlooking the strait, with elevations ranging from 1,500 to 2,000 metres, have been used as a natural fortress. Their rugged terrain, with its hills, caves, and slopes, provides ideal locations for surveillance, military deployment, and the construction of fortified facilities to conceal mobile missile launchers, drones, and radars. This terrain has enhanced the effectiveness of asymmetric weapons through its integration with anti-ship missiles, drones, fast boats, naval mines, and sensor systems. Sustaining the threat to increase navigational risks and costs has become a successful strategic approach to denying an adversary freedom of movement. Direct and complete maritime control is no longer a prerequisite for disrupting the strait, as long as an Anti-Access/Area Denial strategy remains feasible.⁸

7. Ahmed Hafez ,Al Jazeera Net“ ,Geography as the Guardian of the Strait :Can Trump's Ground Operation Alone Ensure Safe Navigation through Hormuz ”?March ,2026 ,31 available at :<https://u.pw/Lg9Y2r>.

8. Bakhtiar Ahmed Saleh“ ,Geography as a Weapon in Contemporary Conflicts :A Strategic Study of the Iranian Case and Its Implications for Regional and International Security ”,Hammurabi Center for Research and Strategic Studies ,July ,2025 ,4 available at :<https://u.pw/uSdKwa>.

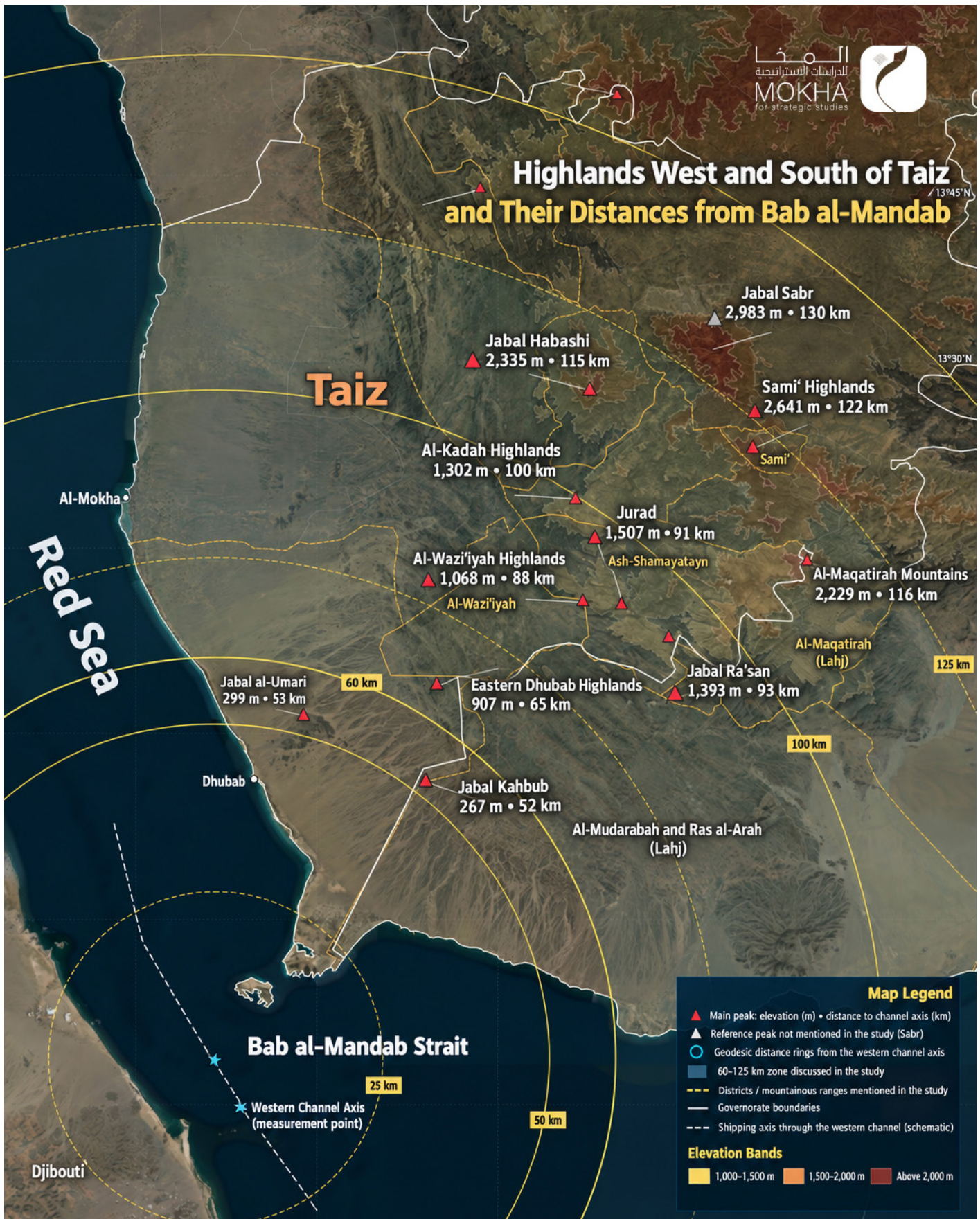
This model provides an instructive framework for understanding what appears to be a Houthi effort to use the mountainous terrain of western and southwestern Taiz to sustain maritime threats in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, compensating for the loss of control over coastal positions and islands at its entrance. The effectiveness of the Houthi militias' use of the Taiz highlands overlooking Bab al-Mandab, however, remains contingent on integrating this terrain with the military, technological, and logistical capabilities and data available to them.

Using the Taiz Highlands to Sustain Maritime Threats

The Houthis, advised by experts from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who accompanied them during operations to seize the western coast from Mokha to the Bab al-Mandab Strait⁹, appear to recognise the difficulty of maintaining lasting control over the strait and a direct presence in nearby coastal camps and fortifications, as well as a permanent presence on neighbouring islands, particularly Mayun Island at the strait's entrance.

They appear to recognise the need for capabilities and fortified positions that would enable them to disrupt passage through the strait, following the Anti-Access/Area Denial strategy employed in Hormuz, both to exert greater pressure and escalate regionally and to prepare for an anticipated major war in which the United States would be a principal party.

9. Reuters", Sources :Iranian Weapons and Advice Helped the Houthis in Yemen Seize Control of Mokha", September ,2026 ,10 available at :<https://www.reuters.com/ar/world/C6ZTMNISNRLNBNGW6Q2B7HWZHY/10-09-2026->



This is particularly relevant following the Pentagon's instructions to US Central Command in the first week of October to complete preparations for the resumption of large-scale combat operations in Iran, as reported by the intelligence news website Axios.¹⁰

On this basis, the Houthis are expected to become more heavily engaged than before in escalating their threats to navigation in Bab al-Mandab, drawing on their present control of most of the western and southwestern Taiz highlands overlooking the strait¹¹ to strengthen their ability to threaten shipping and raise the cost of passage. This scenario aligns with Iran's strategic logic that influencing navigation through Hormuz does not require complete control of the maritime domain, but can also be achieved by undermining its security and denying adversaries freedom of movement.

One of the principal motives behind the Houthis' all-out offensive against the Taiz highlands may be their pursuit of complete control over these heights to sustain maritime threats in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the southern Red Sea. This would explain their continued fighting in a wholly hostile social environment and their willingness to incur heavy losses in equipment and personnel, with casualties estimated at thousands killed and wounded.

10. Al Arabiya Net", Axios :Pentagon Orders Central Command to Prepare for Resumption of Strikes Against Iran", October ,2026 ,8 available at :<https://u.pw/fZYUMu>

11. Xinhua News Agency", Yemeni Sources :Houthis Seize New Areas in the Countryside of Taiz ,Yemen", October ,2026 ,12 available at :<https://arabic.news.cn/20261012/f0d430ddce9424fba5fcb880967ee/21c.html>

In this geopolitical context, the Taiz highlands acquire considerable military importance as elevated positions overlooking and commanding passage through the strait. These include the mountain ranges of Jabal Habashi, Sami', Al-Shamayatayn, and Al-Maqatirah; the highlands of Al-Kadhah, Rasin, Jardad, and Al-Wazi'iyah; and the northwestern highlands of Shar'ab and Maqbanah. These ranges extend southwestwards to connect with the Kahbub highlands, located between Taiz and Lahj, and the heights surrounding Dhubab and Al-Omari, which lie closest to the waters of the Bab al-Mandab Strait.¹²

This geographical reach encompasses varied terrain connecting the mountainous interior to the coast, offering opportunities to incorporate these positions into a broader Anti-Access/Area Denial system. Control over suitable mountain positions enables greater protection and fortification and expands the options for exerting pressure on shipping, helping to sustain maritime threats even without direct control of the strait.

The geopolitical importance of the western and southwestern Taiz highlands, compared with highlands in other Houthi-controlled governorates, is reinforced by three factors.

12. Republic of Yemen ,National Information Center” ,An Overview of Taiz Governorate “,accessed October ,2026 ,12 available at :<https://www.yemen-nic.info/contents/Brief/detail.php?ID&7608=print=Y>

First, their relative proximity to the Bab al-Mandab Strait and its adjacent coastline, with clear lines of sight towards the strait spanning distances of 60–125 kilometres. Their strategic proximity to the main shipping lanes west of Mayun Island at the strait's entrance gives these highlands an advantage in observing shipping and exercising fire control over it, while shortening flight times and reducing warning time for commercial vessels and warships. It also allows the use of cheaper, more numerous short-range weapons, including small drones and short-range missiles.

Second, their high elevations, ranging from 1,000 to 2,000 metres and higher, provide advantages for radar and visual surveillance and guidance communications. Their mountainous terrain also provides natural fortifications as well as newly built ones. This matches the next sentence about rock-drilling equipment. Field sources and press reports indicate that the Houthis are moving rock-drilling equipment to some of these heights.¹³

Third, the Taiz highlands are geographically connected to broader overland areas across Houthi-controlled governorates, particularly Ibb and Hodeidah, and onwards to the remaining northern governorates. These connections allow resources and reinforcements to continue flowing, strengthening the militias' ability to maintain their presence in the highlands and sustain threats to navigation in the southern Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab, even if their control over coastal positions recedes.

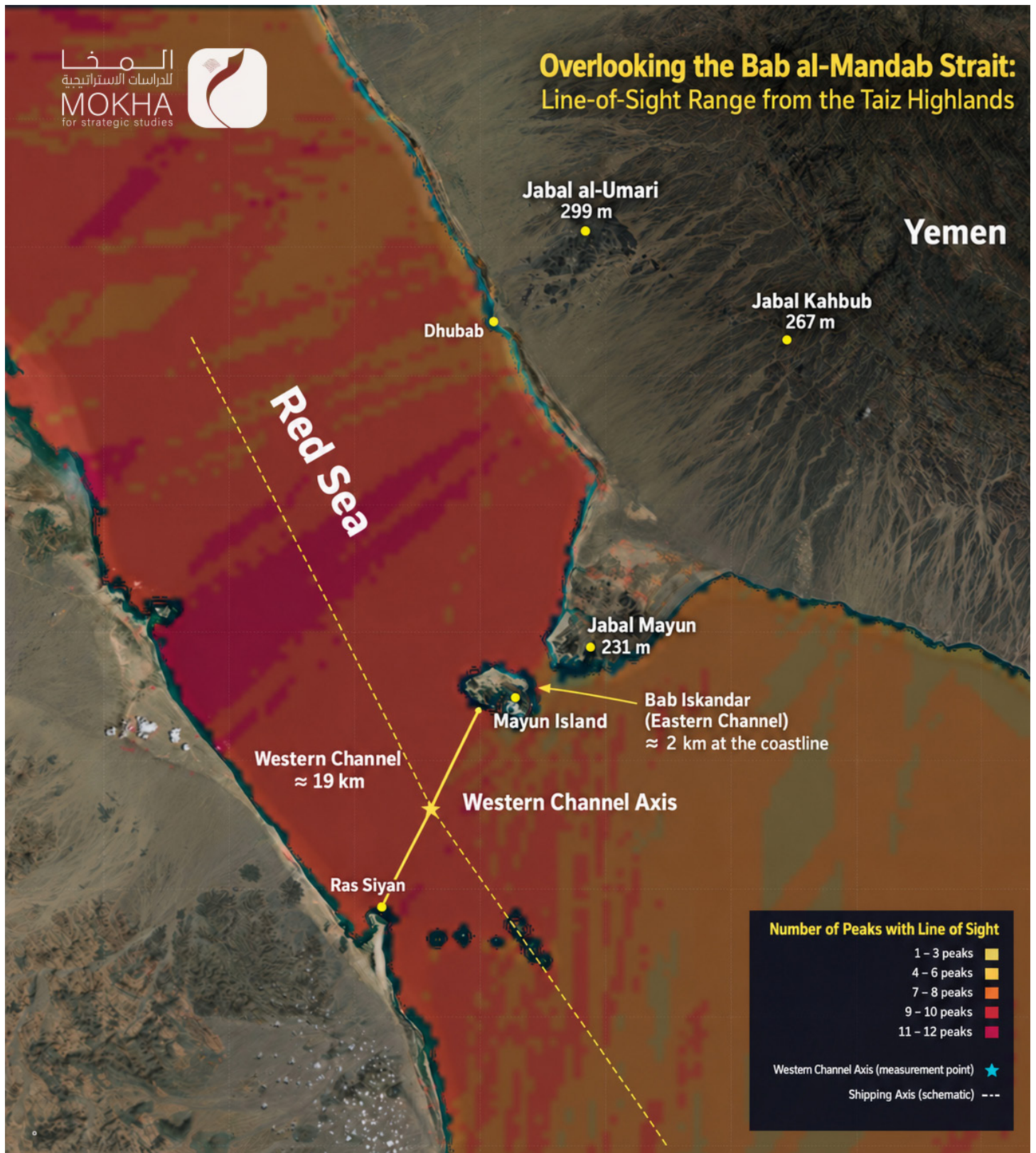
13. Nabdh "Sources :Houthis Began Digging Trenches and Moving Weapons and Launch Platforms to Jabal Matran in Qadas ,Taiz Governorate ,Two Days After Seizing Control of It ",October,2026 ,10 available at :[https2//:u.pw/XDA5EV](https://u.pw/XDA5EV)

Integrating Geography, Capabilities, and Intelligence to Sustain the Threat

Assessing the scenario in which the Houthis use the western and south-western Taiz highlands to threaten maritime security in Bab al-Mandab as an equivalent alternative to coastal control requires distinguishing between three levels: geographical control of the highlands, the ability to operate and sustain military assets, and the actual capacity to affect shipping movements and the cost of securing navigation. Geography, in this sense, helps shape military options, but it can only translate into a sustained maritime threat to the extent that the capabilities needed to exploit, protect, and sustain these advantages are available.

Several indicators support this analysis. In terms of armaments, the Houthis continue to strengthen their capabilities, particularly missiles and drones. Despite the UN Security Council's arms embargo on the Houthis under Resolution 2216 of 2015 and Resolution 2624 of 2022, Iran continues to smuggle weapons to the group. A report on arms smuggling published by Century International in February referred to the interception of a maritime shipment in June 2025 containing anti-ship cruise missiles, guidance components, and drone engines. This illustrates the connection between military supply networks and the availability of assets that can be used to threaten navigation.¹⁴

14. Vina Ali Khan ,Peter Salisbury ,and Henry Thompson“ ,From Smugglers to Supply Chains :How Yemen's Houthi Movement Became a Global Threat ”,Century International ,February ,2026 ,10 available at :<https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/from-smugglers-to-supply-chains-how-yemens-houthi-movement-became-a-global-threat>



The Houthis have gone beyond importing weapons to strengthen their capabilities. A field report published by Conflict Armament Research (CAR) in October describes the seizure of components and industrial equipment believed to support Houthi efforts to expand missile production inside Yemen, including parts associated with ballistic missiles from the Iranian-origin Kheibar Shekan series. The seized items include equipment that can be used in industrial processing, inspection, and quality control.¹⁵ The Yemeni government announced that it had discussed with China the Houthis' use of Chinese dual-use products in weapons manufacturing, and that Beijing had expressed interest in investigating the information provided. These indicators point to the importance of industrial and technological inputs and cross-border supply chains in explaining the development of Houthi military capabilities used to threaten maritime security.¹⁶

On the intelligence dimension, international reports have revealed possible forms of cooperation in intelligence support. The Wall Street Journal reported that, from 2024, Russian targeting data had reached the Houthis and helped them target ships in the Red Sea. The data were passed through members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps accompanying the Houthis, and Russian satellite data had enabled the group to expand its strikes.¹⁷

15. Conflict Armament Research", Houthi Ballistic Missile Production "Issue ,6 October ,2026 accessed October ,2026 ,16 available at :<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories1637/a6eef3d2418abbcd3efa47c256b>

16. Al Riyadh", Yemeni Foreign Minister :We Discussed with China the Houthis 'Use of Chinese Technology to Manufacture Weapons ",October ,2026 ,14 available at :<https://www.alriyadh.com2210919/>

17. Asharq Al-Awsat", Report :Russia Provided' Information 'to the Houthis That Was Used to Attack Ships", October ,2024 ,24 available at :<https2://u.pw8/q5nhW>

Although Russia has not officially acknowledged providing targeting data to the Houthis, a statement by Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, highlights the strategic value of Bab al-Mandab in the calculations of international conflict. In July 2026, he described the strait as a thermonuclear weapon in Iran's possession, referring to the power of threatening to disrupt navigation through it. While this statement reflects Russia's perception of the strait's strategic value, it remains an indicator rather than conclusive evidence in itself that Russia has provided intelligence support to the Houthis or that Russian–Iranian–Houthi coordination over the strait exists.¹⁸

Ultimately, the sustainability of the maritime threat depends on the Houthis' ability to integrate these elements into a viable operational system. Continued arms smuggling, the development of domestic manufacturing, and diversified sources of supply, if reinforced by suitable intelligence capabilities, could increase their ability to compensate for losses in the strait and maintain the threat from alternative positions, even as control over coastal positions changes.

Assessing the Prospects for a Sustained Maritime Threat

Yemeni government forces' recapture of the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the islands commanding its entrance does not mean an end to the Houthi maritime threat, but it changes the conditions and means through which that threat is sustained. If government control over the coast stabilises, the Houthis' ability to use positions directly on the coastline may diminish.

18. CBC Arabic", Medvedev Describes the Bab al-Mandab Strait as 'Iran's Thermonuclear Weapon', July, 4, 2026 available at :<https://u.pw/HyKkdm>

The possibility of a continued maritime threat would nevertheless remain to the extent that the militias retain military and intelligence capabilities and supply networks that can operate from alternative positions. In this scenario, the threat could shift from one based on deployments supported by territorial control along the coast to an intermittent pattern of swift, surprise operations.

The geopolitical importance of the western and southwestern Taiz highlands lies in their connections and proximity to the strait and its adjacent coastline, and in the opportunities their rugged terrain and natural fortifications provide for concealment, protection, flexible movement, and surveillance. These characteristics alone, however, are not sufficient to produce an effective capacity to threaten navigation. The strategic impact of the highlands depends on their integration with available weapons, the information needed to identify targets, and the capacity to maintain systems and replace losses. Developments in material and technical inputs, supply networks, and intelligence support may therefore prove decisive in determining whether geography remains a latent advantage or becomes an active element in sustaining the threat.



One of the greatest challenges facing the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led Coalition to Support Legitimacy therefore extends beyond securing the strait, coastline, and islands. It also involves preventing sources of threat from re-emerging in the nearby interior, while building a sustained capacity for surveillance, early warning, and response. Retaking the Bab al-Mandab Strait represents an important step towards securing it. Sustaining maritime security in the strait, the southern Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden requires a comprehensive approach to the threat system and the sources that enable its renewal.

Conclusion

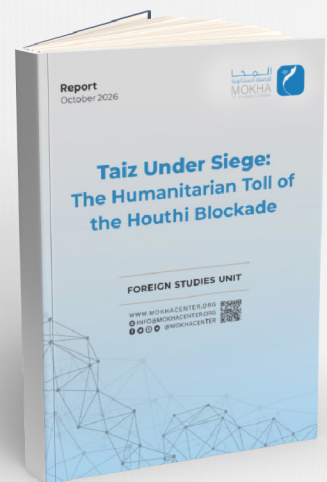
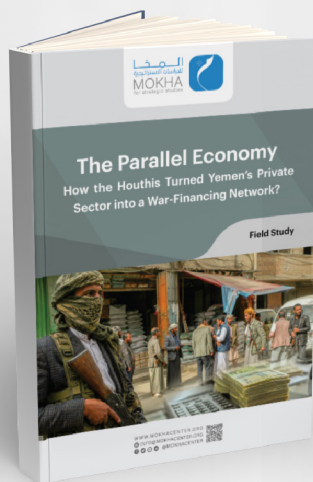
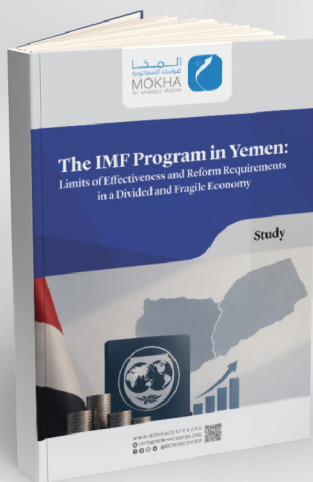
This paper concludes that understanding the Houthi maritime threat requires moving beyond a view that treats the land front and the maritime domain as separate. Yemen's geography, particularly the highlands of western and southwestern Taiz, influences the balance of the conflict over the Bab al-Mandab Strait and its adjacent coastline through its role in movement and supply routes, defensive positioning, and the cost of military counter-operations.

The Houthis' loss of direct control over the Bab al-Mandab Strait—if consolidated on the ground—would therefore not necessarily end all forms of maritime threat, but would change its conditions, limits, and costs. The continuation of this threat depends on the military capabilities available to the Houthis and the integrity of their supply and communication lines.

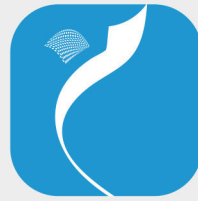
It also depends on the ability of Yemeni government forces and the Popular Resistance, supported by the Coalition to Support Legitimacy, to end Houthi control over the Taiz highlands and establish a military presence capable of preventing any Houthi pockets from remaining there. Further requirements include strengthening maritime surveillance mechanisms to prevent the smuggling of missiles, drones, and their components, and ensuring that supplies and international intelligence data facilitating attacks on ships are cut off. Together, these measures would consolidate control over Yemen's coastline along the southern Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab, and the associated highlands, extending to the Gulf of Aden and its adjoining waters.

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