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IRAN AND THE HOUTHIS' ASYMMETRIC MARITIME WARFARE CAMPAIGN IN THE RED SEA: A STUDY OF THE SPONSOR-PROXY MODEL

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Abstract

This research article investigates the relationship between the Houthis and Iran within the framework of the sponsor-proxy academic debate using the Houthis' Red Sea campaign as a case study. The primary goal of the article is to highlight how the Houthis have cultivated deeper, more sophisticated security engagements with Iran while preserving significant agency over its command-and-control structures, internal decision-making processes, and agenda-setting of strategic priorities. It starts by examining Iran's military doctrine, focusing on the role that deterrence, forward defense, and the "Axis of Resistance" play in informing the Iranian republic's strategic thinking and shaping its policy options. It focuses on analyzing the origins of the Houthis as a nascent maritime force regionally, specifically singling out Iran's multifaceted role in consolidating Houthi force projection capabilities at sea. It then delves into the study of the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, mapping the strategic considerations and tactical means underpinning the Houthi campaign against international commercial shipping.

Keywords: Houthis, Iran, Red Sea, Proxy Warfare, Asymmetric Maritime Warfare.

Introduction

On November 19, 2023, the Yemeni armed group Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), commonly known as the Houthis, seized the vehicle carrier *Galaxy Leader*, a Bahamas-flagged commercial ship co-owned by the Israel-based Ray Car Carriers shipping company. While transiting the lower Red Sea on its route from Turkey to India, the Houthis boarded and took control of the ship from a helicopter. Since the *Galaxy Leader*'s capture, the Houthis have launched dozens of multipronged attacks on commercial and military vessels in and around the Red Sea. The Houthi maritime offensive has integrated a diverse array of weapons solutions, including anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, flotillas of fast attack craft, unmanned aircraft vehicles (UAVs), and unmanned surface vessels (USVs). Although traditionally a land-based armed group, the Houthi military expansion to the Hodeida Governorate, home to one of the most prominent Yemeni ports, in 2014 prompted the group to strengthen its maritime guerilla tactics. The increasing sophistication of Houthi maritime offensive capabilities was reflected in the launch of several small-scale hybrid warfare operations in the Red Sea basin starting in 2015. Yet, the scale of attacks, the kinds of weapons systems involved, and the scope of maritime operations conducted since mid-November 2023 are unprecedented. The Houthis have framed their Red Sea campaign as a military move aimed at signaling its support for Hamas and building pressure on Israel to halt the offensive on the Gaza Strip. While acknowledging the role of anti-Israel and anti-US sentiments in informing the strategic and military posturing of the Houthis, this study argues that the pursuit of the Yemeni armed group's domestic and regional strategic ambitions represents the main driving force of the Houthi offensive on international maritime traffic. In this regard, Houthi asymmetric maritime warfare efforts in the broader context of the Israel-Gaza war provide valuable insights into the role of Iran's security assistance in strengthening Houthi maritime warfare capabilities, the complex web of military and foreign policy connections between the Houthis and Iran, and the evolution of the Houthi war machine's role in Iran's regional network of non-state armed groups, known as the "Axis of Resistance."

The article begins with a brief overview of the contemporary scholarly debate on proxy warfare. The following section will present the evolution and main features informing Iran's military doctrine, focusing primarily on deterrence, the forward defense concept, and the "Axis of Resistance." The article will then review the Houthi-Iran relationship in light of the sponsor-proxy scholarly debate. The section thereafter will investigate the origins of the maritime asymmetric warfare capabilities of the Houthis. Finally, the article will review the Houthi Red Sea campaign, delving especially into the strategic considerations that underpin the Houthi maritime offensive and the tactical means through which it is conducted.

An Overview of Sponsor-Proxy Dynamics

Starting with the Cold War, sponsor-proxy wars have become a topic of growing scholarly attention. Framed within the context of a power competition in the bipolar world order, proxy wars were primarily studied through the lens of power confrontation between great powers. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Cold War era literature on proxy wars focused mainly on analyzing the intervening actors and measurable aspects of the sponsor-proxy relationship.⁽¹⁾

However, contemporary scholarship on sponsor-proxy warfare has highlighted how the proxy war concept has significantly evolved since its first introduction during the Cold War era.⁽²⁾ Although terminology and metrics to study sponsor-proxy wars remain objects of contestation on the broader proxy debate, recent definitions of proxy warfare have reached a consensus on some critical features of contemporary proxy warfare. These include overcoming the understanding of proxy wars as an exclusive byproduct of great power competition, acknowledging the role of non-state actors as potential benefactors, and stressing the relational dimension of the principal-agent interaction.⁽³⁾ For instance, Mumford has classified a proxy war “as the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome.”⁽⁴⁾ Mumford maintains that both state and non-state actors can be benefactors, intervening as outside actors in a state’s internal affairs and providing weapons, training, and funding to a chosen proxy.⁽⁵⁾ Similarly, Groh has defined proxy war as “directing the use of force by a politically motivated, local actor to indirectly influence political affairs in the target state.”⁽⁶⁾ Most importantly, Groh has underlined how the patron-proxy dynamic inherently generates a hierarchical relationship between the two actors, with the proxy prioritizing the benefactor’s interests over its own agenda and scaling down its autonomy in order to access the intervening actor’s support.⁽⁷⁾

Daniel Byman has identified strategic, ideological and domestic factors as three main drivers prompting actors to intervene in a state’s internal affairs. Strategic concerns include destabilizing or weakening a neighbor, projecting power, changing the regime, and shaping opposition. Ideological factors include enhancing international prestige and exporting the political system. Finally, domestic political considerations entail providing affiliates with military or operational aid.⁽⁸⁾ The intervening party’s support of a local actor remains a fundamental cornerstone of the principal-agent relationship. Byman has identified six types of state support to non-state groups: training and operations; money, arms, and logistics; diplomatic backing; help with organizing; ideological direction; and sanctuary.⁽⁹⁾

Iran’s Military Doctrine

Since the emergence of the Iranian republic, the role of US forces in the Middle East and the imbalance between its conventional military capabilities and those of its neighboring countries and extra-regional adversaries have deeply informed the Iranian leadership’s threat perception.⁽¹⁰⁾ The overriding imperative to ensure regime security and compensate for the country’s limitations in hard power

means has played a core role in shaping Iran's military doctrine and its strategic choices.⁽¹¹⁾ The experience of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) has played a pivotal role in defining Iran's military outlook for two main reasons: first, it highlighted Iran's shortcomings in fighting a conventional war; second, it heightened the Iranian leadership's sense of insecurity and vulnerability to external attacks. As a result, determined to ensure regime survival vis-à-vis future security threats, Iran invested mainly in developing effective deterrent military capabilities.⁽¹²⁾ The threat to wage unconventional war and the fast-expanding ballistic missile program rapidly emerged as the bedrock of Iran's deterrent posturing.⁽¹³⁾

The Course of Forward Defense

Fundamental reconfigurations of the regional balance of power and political order triggered by the US invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 and the 2011 "Arab Spring" significantly influenced the Iranian leadership's threat perception and, by extension, the country's military doctrine. Fearful of being the next target in Washington's "War on Terror" and being aware of the country's power imbalance against US military might, Iran developed a multilayered defense architecture that contemplated both conventional and non-conventional warfare, the so-called mosaic defense⁽¹⁴⁾ concept. Although still firmly grounded in deterrence-based strategic thinking, mosaic defense revolves around the idea of denying a potential invader from gaining superiority in the air, sea and land domains by engaging its forces in asymmetric warfare and by conducting in-depth attrition combat on national territory through mass popular mobilization.⁽¹⁵⁾ The core rationale of asymmetric warfare is not about inflicting an absolute military defeat on the adversary but taking advantage of weaknesses and gaps in its military forces to exhaust the opponent's willingness to conduct sustained combat operations. In this context, the consolidation of asymmetric warfare capabilities aimed at pursuing anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) started to assume growing relevance in informing Iran's military doctrine. In a nutshell, anti-access capabilities aim to prevent a potential invading force from getting into the country's mainland; area denial capabilities, instead, seek to downgrade the invading force's capacity to conduct operations in the combat areas.⁽¹⁶⁾ Iran has gradually built a complex asymmetric warfare doctrine that is grounded on the integrated deployment of mobile air defense systems, ballistic missiles, electronic and cyber warfare attacks, and naval combat operations.⁽¹⁷⁾

In the aftermath of the 2011 "Arab Spring," Iran opted to design an offensive component to its deterrent defense doctrine, known as the forward defense strategy. The core rationale underpinning the decision to add a new layer to the country's national defense strategy was to provide Tehran with region-wide strategic depth to oppose its adversaries and counter threats to regime security far from Iranian territory. The forward defense doctrine's ultimate goal is, therefore, to avoid exposing Iran's mainland to the negative fallouts of an all-out war by engaging in fights against opponents in buffer zones remote from national soil.⁽¹⁸⁾ Iran's

forward defense toolkit relies on four main pillars: its missile program, cyber warfare capabilities, autonomous systems, and its region-wide network of non-state armed groups,⁽¹⁹⁾ also known as the “Axis of Resistance.”

The “Axis of Resistance”

Although the role of non-state armed groups in Iran’s strategic thinking became more pronounced in the 2010s, proxy forces have played a central strategic function in Iran’s military doctrine since the early 1980s. The “Axis of Resistance” consists of an Iran-led political-security bloc regrouping like-minded states and non-state actors across the Middle East sharing a common understanding of the international system based on an anti-imperialist and Islamic globalist agenda.⁽²⁰⁾ In this regard, significant emotional components of the Iranian state’s identity, such as empathy for the Shiite community and resentment against the West, have significantly contributed to informing the country’s coalition-building strategy in the broader Middle East.⁽²¹⁾ Although it is difficult to provide an exact figure of the members of the “Axis,” the Iran-led network is generally understood to comprise a constellation of armed militias in Iraq, the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen.⁽²²⁾ Ideologically, the “Axis” has evolved from being “a primarily state-centered enterprise [...] into a transnational project supported by an organic network of popular armed movements from across the region.”⁽²³⁾ The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) has been at the forefront of implementing Iran’s proxy warfare strategy, primarily by providing like-minded non-state actors with weapons supplies, technical assistance to indigenize Iranian-made advanced military technologies, and military training.⁽²⁴⁾ The “Axis of Resistance” has played a central role in Iran’s military doctrine because it has allowed the country to exercise asymmetric deterrence against its regional and extra-regional adversaries, broaden its strategic depth in the region, and try to attain politico-military ends while lowering the risks of being dragged into an all-out confrontation with its antagonists and benefiting from plausible deniability.⁽²⁵⁾ On top of these expected gains, Iran’s militant client strategy also serves the country’s national security imperatives because it has provided Iran with an effective platform to export its revolutionary politico-religious ideology across the region and recruit new allies to uphold its state interests.⁽²⁶⁾ The growing centrality of non-state armed groups in Iran’s deterrence strategy over the past four decades has prompted the country to design a peculiar model of security assistance that combines technical, messianic, economic, and strategic considerations.⁽²⁷⁾

However, deploying the “Axis” as an instrument of foreign policy is not a risk-free endeavor for Iran. Hardening the military posture of its Western antagonists, souring the perception of the country’s role in the eyes of regional neighbors, perpetuating a geopolitical climate conducive to instability and insecurity, and fueling domestic political disorder are among the inherent dangers of Iran’s militant client-based deterrence strategy.⁽²⁸⁾ Especially at the regional level, although

Iran frames the concepts of forward defense and “Axis of Resistance” within its deterrence-based defensive architecture, the country’s ascendant military role in the post-2011 regional uprisings has increased the suspicions of its adversaries that Iran cultivates expansionist foreign policy and military ambitions, fueling security dilemmas that could increase regional tensions.⁽²⁹⁾ Considering the central function of non-state armed groups in Iran’s military doctrine, the country is likely to undertake calibrated actions to preserve its region-wide strategic depth by further entrenching its position in critical enclaves. Yet, this might augment the risk of further aggravating the region’s already fragile politico-security outlook.⁽³⁰⁾ Indeed, although Iran has become increasingly apt at adjusting its proxy strategy to a changing regional geopolitical environment and evolving national security priorities over the last four decades, the ever-present risk of escalation and already-simmering regional tensions loom over the long-term sustainability of the country’s proxy warfare doctrine.⁽³¹⁾

The Houthi-Iran Relationship and the Sponsor-Proxy Debate

Although the Houthis are often depicted as Iran’s proxy of choice in the Arabian Peninsula, equating the Houthis to other armed groups affiliated with Iran’s “Axis of Resistance,” such as Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite armed groups, is misleading and does not fully capture the complexity of the Houthi-Iran relationship. Over the past decade, the Houthis have cultivated greater military and strategic integration with Tehran and the Iran-led regional network of armed groups as a means to promote their political agenda and attain their military goals in Yemen.⁽³²⁾

The attainment of significant symbolic and tangible gains has often prompted the Houthis to undertake actions traditional of Iran’s full-fledged proxy forces, such as when the Yemeni insurgent group revendicated the September 14 attack on the Saudi oil facilities of Abqaiq and Khurais.⁽³³⁾ Similar episodes combined with large-scale security assistance provided by Iran and its regional network of armed groups to the Houthis in the form of military training, weapons and ammunitions supply and technology transfer have inevitably strengthened the perception of the Houthis as a Yemeni version of Lebanon’s Hezbollah.⁽³⁴⁾ However, although the growing entanglement of the Houthis within the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance,” the Houthi-Iran relationship seems to defy conventional patron-proxy dynamics.

Compared to Iran’s deep-rooted and multifaceted relationships with Lebanon’s Hezbollah and the Iraqi constellation of Shiite armed groups, Iran-Houthi ties are the result of relatively recent geopolitical developments. For most of its history, Yemen’s domestic politics has been on the periphery of Iran’s regional priorities.⁽³⁵⁾ Although it is plausible that Iran-Houthi weapons smuggling connections pre-date the outbreak of the uprising against the then-Yemeni President Saleh, elements suggesting Iran’s security assistance to the Yemeni insurgent group became more numerous starting in 2011.⁽³⁶⁾ There is a growing body of evidence and a consolidated consensus in the research community studying the Iran-Houthi relationship that Iran has played a paramount role in strengthening the offensive

capabilities of the Houthis over the past decade.⁽³⁷⁾ Starting with shipments of small-caliber firearms and ammunition, Iran's security assistance has gradually evolved to also include more advanced weapons systems such as air defense systems and UAVs.⁽³⁸⁾ Beyond equipping the Houthis with sophisticated weaponry, Iran's security assistance has also focused on providing them with training and technical assistance on how to operate air defense solutions and, most importantly, how to assemble and manufacture them locally.⁽³⁹⁾

In addition to advancing Houthi combat capabilities, there is significant evidence pointing to how Iran and the "Axis of Resistance" members have provided the Houthis with critical support to strengthen the Houthis' military organizational structure, media outreach, and diplomatic standing.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The full-spectrum security support of Iran to the Yemeni armed group's war efforts has reinforced the idea of the Houthis as an Iranian proxy force in the Arabian Peninsula.⁽⁴¹⁾

Although growing evidence points to the consolidation of military engagement between the Houthis, Iran and the "Axis of Resistance," an expanding body of policy-oriented works and academic studies has highlighted how the Iran-Houthi relationship defies conventional sponsor-proxy dynamics. In this regard, the researcher Peter Salisbury contests the argument that Iran's security support to the Houthis was a critical factor in ushering the insurgent group's rise to power in 2014. He argues that the bulk of the financial and military power of the Houthis originated from local sources, including the alliance of convenience with Yemen's then-President Saleh.⁽⁴²⁾ The researcher Alex Vatanka concurs in deflating Iran's influence over Yemen's balance of power in the early stages of Yemen's civil war. He stresses how Iran sought to capitalize on Houthi military success, even to the point of overstating its role, to advance its strategic interests amid the regional power struggle with Saudi Arabia.⁽⁴³⁾ The researcher Thomas Juneau also identifies competition against domestic actors over the local control of power and resources rather than sectarian and ideological considerations as a pivotal driving factor in motivating Houthi war efforts. Yemen's marginal role in Iran's top strategic priorities prompted Iran to mobilize limited resources and to condition the provision of more complex military support on Houthi fighting successes on the ground. Most importantly, he points to Iran's limited assistance to the Houthis, albeit an increasing one if compared to the pre-Houthi takeover of Sana'a phase, and the lack of a hierarchical relationship between the two actors to rebut the idea of the Houthis as a full-fledged Iranian proxy. Finally, Juneau recognizes that Iran's support to the Houthis represented a low-cost investment for Iran that yielded modest dividends in its efforts to advance its regional agenda.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The Houthi-Iran partnership is not fixed in time and space, it is vulnerable to reconfigurations and adjustments. Indeed, Iran's security assistance to the Houthis has measurably increased in scale and sophistication in the aftermath of the Yemeni insurgent group's takeover of Sana'a.⁽⁴⁵⁾ However, it would be misleading to equate mounting Iranian material support to an increase

in Iran's clout over the Houthis. The researcher Elisabeth Kendall posits that Houthi pragmatism played a central role in drawing the armed group closer to Iran's camp, highlighting the group's independent decision-making. She points to the Houthi alliance of convenience with the then-President of Yemen Saleh as a paradigmatic example of the insurgent group's proclivity to strike practical deals in order to access critical military support.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Vatanka also concurs with the recognition that the increasing sophistication of Iran's security assistance to the Houthis played a central role in bolstering the insurgent group's offensive capabilities. Nevertheless, he argues that the Houthi reluctance to fully embrace Iran's regional foreign policy goals and its strategic overstretch in the Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese conflict fronts were among the main factors preventing the emergence of a patron-proxy relationship between the two actors.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Similarly, Juneau contends that Iran's security assistance has contributed to facilitating the rise of the Houthis as the dominant domestic actor in Yemen's power struggle. Moreover, he notes how the successful entrenchment of the Houthis into northwestern Yemen's political and military fabric has provided a conducive environment for the Zaydi armed group to develop an independent foreign policy agenda, turning a domestic competition-driven actor into a player with region-wide power projection capabilities and ambitions.⁽⁴⁸⁾ In this regard, Marie-Louise Clausen argues that the emerging close alignment between the foreign agendas of the Houthis and Iran does not neglect the fact that the Yemeni insurgent group has gradually developed an independent foreign policy posture. The Houthis' severe diplomatic isolation prompted them to rely heavily on Iran's support to pursue international recognition. Still, the Houthis have leveraged its strong agency at the domestic level and independent capacity to conduct military actions to boost its credentials as an autonomous actor regionally.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Although Houthi-Iran military cooperation and the armed group's integration into the Iran-led "Axis" camp have exponentially grown since the Houthi takeover of Sana'a, this is not sufficient evidence to present the Houthis as a full-fledged Iranian proxy force. Eleonora Ardemagni posits that the Houthis' financial independence from foreign revenue streams, the centrality of the local power struggle in its political agenda, its structure of power based on family bloodline and class affiliation, and its non-adherence to Twelver Shiite-Khomeinism religious-ideological worldview represent four main factors differentiating the Houthis from other groups in the Iran-led "Axis."⁽⁵⁰⁾

Consequently, as long as the Houthis preserve consistent autonomous agency over decision-making processes and command-and-control military structures, significant financial independence from overseas financing sources and an independent religious-ideological background, it would be misleading and analytically reductive to classify the Houthis as an Iranian proxy force on par with Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraq's Shiite armed groups.

A Nascent Maritime Asymmetric Force

Born and bred as an armed group in the Sa'ada Governorate, a Yemeni northern region dominated by rugged mountains, the Houthis have historically sought to use the roughness of the terrain to their advantage when fighting against adversaries endowed with more significant conventional firepower. The insurgent group has turned guerrilla warfare and attrition tactics into key pillars of its combat capabilities to level the playing field against its opponents.⁽⁵¹⁾ The six rounds of military confrontations fought by the Houthis against the Yemeni central government, known as the Sa'ada Wars, between 2004 and 2010 are a case in point of the insurgent group's capabilities in waging irregular mountain warfare.⁽⁵²⁾ The Houthi capture of Hodeida marked a turning point for the Houthi warfare doctrine and tactics. The Houthis' extension of control to large swaths of the Yemeni western coast and the country's largest port, on the one hand, and access to the Yemeni army's stockpiles of weaponry and naval assets, on the other hand, presented the Houthis with both the means and the strategic linchpin to also leverage the maritime domain in the pursuit of its domestic politics goals. Critical naval weapons systems and assets that fell into Houthi hands included coastal missile batteries, patrol craft, and ammunition deposits. With the Houthis' tightening their power grip in northwestern Yemen, they have gradually developed a diffused network of military outposts in coastal areas and islands. The Houthis also sought to broaden their capacity to project power over the Bab al-Mandab Strait by launching a southward military expansion campaign between 2015 and 2017. In addition to land incursions, the Houthi assault included a maritime component that focused on launching attacks on vessels in the Bab al-Mandab Strait area.⁽⁵³⁾ With the 2018 UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement to stop fighting around Yemen's Red Sea city of Hodeida and the conquest of the oil and gas-rich province of Marib topping the Houthis' expansionist military ambitions, conducting naval warfare operations in the southern Red Sea took a backseat in the Houthi agenda of strategic priorities.⁽⁵⁴⁾ However, maritime tensions have resurfaced occasionally. For instance, clashes briefly erupted in October and November 2022 when the Houthis conducted missile and drone attacks on oil export terminals in the government-held port cities of Al-Dhabba and Qana to apply pressure on Yemen's internationally recognized government amid truce renewal negotiations.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Since 2015, the Houthis have mastered a fast-expanding arsenal of weaponry and guerrilla tactics to conduct maritime asymmetric warfare. These include a broad range of weapons systems, including anti-ship missiles, UAVs, USVs, and kinetic naval actions such as commercial ship seizures and boat swarm attacks. Missiles and UAVs have emerged as the Houthis' weapons of choice to carry out insurgency-type naval warfare. The Houthis launched several missile and drone strikes on naval assets of the Saudi-led coalition and the United States deployed in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, especially during the 2015-2017 Houthi anti-shipping campaign.⁽⁵⁶⁾ The destructive missile strike on the UAE logistics ship in October 2016, three unsuccessful missile attacks on the Arleigh Burke-class

guided-missile destroyer USS Mason in the same month, and the strike on the Turkish ship Ince Inebolu in May 2018 are among the most dangerous Houthi missile strikes.⁽⁵⁷⁾ While large amounts of the Yemen army's missile stockpiles, including outdated Soviet-era and more recent Chinese-made missiles, ended up in Houthi hands after the insurgent group's takeover of Sana'a, the technology and designs of most of the Houthi missiles and UAVs are believed to have overseas origins. Over the past years, significant evidence has been accumulated highlighting Iran's role in expanding the array and sophistication of Houthi missile and drone inventory.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Indeed, rebranded versions of Iranian-made missiles and UAVs are suspected to represent the bulk of Houthi missile and drone firepower. The close similarities in the design of missile systems and UAVs showcased during Houthi military parades and Iranian-made weapons systems speak volumes about Tehran's complicity in upgrading the Yemeni insurgent group's combat capabilities.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Although it remains difficult to grasp a precise picture of the extent of Iran's assistance to the Houthi missile and drone programs, the Iranian republic is believed to give full-spectrum military sustain to the Yemeni insurgent group, from offering technical support in the set-up of domestic manufacturing lines to providing off-the-shelf components for local assembly and supplying complete weapons systems.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Recurrent seizures of high-tech parts, missiles and rocket propellants from fishing dhows in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden provide more evidence of Iran's multipronged support to the Houthi quest to bolster its missile and UAV power projection capabilities.⁽⁶¹⁾

The Houthis have gradually increased the use of USVs to conduct maritime asymmetric guerilla warfare. The Houthi arsenal of explosives-laden remote-controlled boats includes locally manufactured water-borne improvised explosive devices (WBIEDs), such as weaponized versions of the Yemeni navy's patrol boats and traditional Yemeni fishing skiffs, and purpose-built designs, such as the Toofan ("flood" in Arabic) craft family.⁽⁶²⁾ On January 30, 2017, a Houthi WBIED struck the Royal Saudi Navy frigate Al Madinah, marking the insurgent group's first confirmed use of a USV. Severe damage was reported, including the deaths of two Saudi sailors, the onboard helicopter's destruction, and damage to the warship's stern section.⁽⁶³⁾ To carry out the attack, the Houthis converted a 10-meter interceptor boat, initially donated by the UAE to the Yemeni navy, into a WBIED.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Since the strike on the Al Madinah frigate, Houthi seaborne attacks have grown in frequency and diversity. In late April 2017, the Saudi Coast Guard thwarted a remote-controlled explosive-laden boat's attack on a Saudi Aramco fuel terminal in Jizan Province.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Three months later, in July 2017, a Houthi WBIED targeted the port of Mocha, with the explosive boat's detonation causing damage to berthed vessels.⁽⁶⁶⁾ While initially focused on conducting strikes against the Saudi-led coalition's military assets, the Houthis rapidly broadened the scope of seaborne attacks to also target merchant ships and coastal infrastructure. In January 2018, the insurgent group conducted the first remote-piloted explosive-filled boat attack on a commercial vessel. This Saudi-flagged oil tanker was defended by a

Saudi warship escorting the commercial vessel.⁽⁶⁷⁾ The Houthis significantly ramped up unmanned explosive-filled boat attacks on merchant ships during the Saudi-Emirati military campaign to free the port city of Hodeida in 2018. The uptick in assaults on Saudi-flagged oil tankers prompted Riyadh to halt crude oil shipments through the Bab al-Mandab Strait temporarily.⁽⁶⁸⁾ In March 2020, four Houthi WBEIDs attempted an attack on an oil tanker in the southern Red Sea. The Houthis used weaponized fishing skiffs to conduct the assault on the commercial vessel, showcasing the insurgent group's broadening arsenal of USVs.⁽⁶⁹⁾ In mid-December 2020, a Houthi bomb-laden remote-controlled boat attacked the Jeddah port's fuel terminal, damaging the Singapore-flagged oil tanker BW Rhine.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Although the Saudi-led coalition forces foiled several Houthi assaults and destroyed large numbers of booby-trapped boats,⁽⁷¹⁾ Houthi seaborne attacks have continued to threaten commercial shipping routes in the southern Red Sea and cause serious harm to merchant vessels.⁽⁷²⁾ While WBIEDs are manufactured locally, a growing body of evidence suggests that fishing skiffs, patrol boats and small craft were weaponized through conversion kits supplied by Iran.⁽⁷³⁾

The Houthis also seized some commercial ships. On November 18, 2019, the Houthis took control of a Saudi tugboat and a South Korean tugboat, which were towing a South Korean-flagged drilling rig in the southern Red Sea, claiming that the ships entered Yemen's territorial waters without permission. The three vessels and crewmembers were freed after a three-day seizure at the Houthi-controlled port of Salif.⁽⁷⁴⁾ On January 3, 2022, Houthi militants captured the UAE-flagged cargo ship Rawabi.⁽⁷⁵⁾ The vessel was reportedly carrying medical field equipment from the Yemeni island of Socotra and the Saudi port of Jizan when it was seized in international waters off the Hodeida coast. Held captive at Salif port for nearly four months, the Rawabi's crew was then released in the context of the so-called Ramadan ceasefire agreement.⁽⁷⁶⁾

Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea

Based on the proxy-agent model, there are a host of considerations, tactics and objectives driving Houthi attacks in the Red Sea following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood that can be explained as follows:

Strategic Considerations

When it comes to identifying the motivations of the Houthi assault on commercial shipping in and around the Red Sea, the Yemeni insurgent group's maritime offensive appears to be driven by a mix of ideological and strategic considerations. According to some experts, the Houthis' ideological and religious beliefs and efforts cast the group as a revolutionary liberation movement guided by pan-Islamist goals,⁽⁷⁷⁾ which has played a pivotal role in forming the political ambitions of the Yemeni insurgent group.⁽⁷⁸⁾

However, some analysts have observed that the prospect of achieving significant strategic gains at the domestic and regional levels has also significantly

influenced the Houthis' decision to launch Red Sea attacks.⁽⁷⁹⁾ The October 7 attack and the following Israeli war on Gaza came at a critical juncture for the Houthis. On the one hand, the insurgent group was suffering a decline in public support and experiencing difficulties in delivering services in areas under its control.⁽⁸⁰⁾ The Houthi military confrontation against the United States and the UK in the context of the Israeli war on Gaza has provided the Houthis with an effective escape valve to deflect public attention from the insurgent group's governing failures and boost its reputational standing among Yemenis through large-scale mobilization, recruitment, and indoctrination campaigns.⁽⁸¹⁾

Moreover, tightening the Houthis' power grip on territories already under their control might have contributed to laying the ground for the long-sought-after insurgent group's military expansion into energy-rich and geographically strategic regions such as Taiz, Marib and Shabwa, and areas in southern Hodeida.⁽⁸²⁾ Although the Houthis have strategically sought to frame their maritime aggression campaign to tap into pro-Palestinian sentiments and rally political sympathies regionally, the Yemeni armed group's core ends remain strongly focused on furthering its domestic politico-military agenda.⁽⁸³⁾

On the other hand, the Houthi group was involved in advanced stages of peace talks with Saudi Arabia.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Talks that both Saudi and Houthi counterparts have sought to shield from the maritime escalation's ripple effects.⁽⁸⁵⁾ Therefore, as the Houthis cast themselves as a military force capable of inflicting severe harm to commercial, energy and military shipping in the Red Sea basin, there is reason to believe that the Yemeni insurgent group might leverage its fast-advancing offensive military capabilities as a bargaining chip to extract more concessions at the negotiating table with Saudi Arabia and the international community.

The decision to seek military intervention in the Israel-Hamas war by opening a battlefield in the Red Sea has allowed the Houthis to achieve three main goals in its relationship with Iran and the "Axis of Resistance." First, the Yemeni rebel group has firmly entrenched itself within the "Axis" camp by demonstrating both the political will and the military means to stand up at the front lines of the Iran-led bloc's resistance fight against the United States and Israel regionally.⁽⁸⁶⁾ Second, the Houthis have sought to differentiate themselves from other armed groups in the "Axis of Resistance" galaxy by pursuing a more aggressive stance against Israel. Contrary to other members of the "Axis" bloc, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite armed groups, which have exercised restraint while engaging in carefully calibrated shows of force, the Houthis have pursued an approach based on escalating and expanding the violent confrontation with Israel and Western countries.⁽⁸⁷⁾ This assertive posture has allowed the Yemeni armed group to sell the "Houthi brand" regionally and to showcase that it retains considerable decision-making autonomy and agency over the conduct of military operations.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Finally, the Red Sea attacks have provided the Houthis with an unprecedented opportunity to pursue and test greater military coordination with other members of

the “Axis” camp, as suggested by the increasing number of joint operations conducted with Iraqi armed groups.⁽⁸⁹⁾

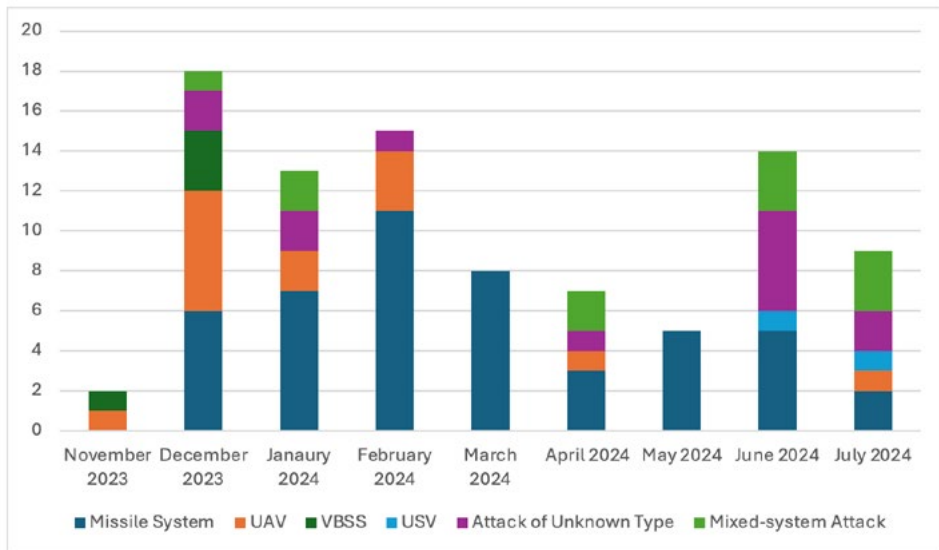
However, the Houthi attacks also carry some risks for Iran. Indeed, the ongoing maritime offensive of the Yemeni armed group might challenge a cornerstone of Iran’s regional defense architecture: avoiding an all-out military confrontation with the United States and Israel.⁽⁹⁰⁾ In this regard, protracted Houthi war efforts in and around the Red Sea have significantly increased regional tensions, as exemplified by the intensification of air warfare skirmishes, such as the US-led air campaign on military targets in Houthi-held territories in Yemen, Houthi airstrikes on southern Israel, and Israel’s bombing of Hodeida port. As a result, the severe uptick in high-intensity armed confrontations might risk setting Iran on a collision course with the United States and Israel.

Tactical Means

The Yemeni armed group has used its densely interconnected string of military outposts in coastal areas and islands as a linchpin to launch attacks against maritime traffic in and around the Red Sea.⁽⁹¹⁾ At first, the Houthis claimed that Israeli-linked commercial vessels were the exclusive focus of their maritime offensive.⁽⁹²⁾ Then, on December 9, 2023, the Houthis announced that all merchant vessels bound for Israeli ports and ships owned by shipping companies having trade cooperation ties with Israeli businesses would be considered legitimate targets.⁽⁹³⁾ Following the beginning of joint US-UK air and missile strikes on Houthi military targets in Yemen on January 11, 2024, the Houthis further broadened their targets to include commercial ships owned by US and UK companies.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Although the Houthis appears to have refrained from conducting an indiscriminate targeting of commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea basin, the Houthi ship targeting behavior has gradually become more erratic, as showcased by strikes on ships with no apparent connections to Israel in terms of port calls or company ownership. Indeed, even commercial ships that broadcasted “no connection to Israel” data through the navigation safety feature, known as the Automatic Identification System, as a preventive measure to avoid being targeted have fallen victim to Houthi attacks.⁽⁹⁵⁾ More surprisingly, the Houthis have also struck merchant vessels whose ownership was linked to or transporting cargo bound for non-Western countries, such as Russia, China, and Iran.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Two main factors seem to be behind the Yemeni insurgent group’s erratic targeting behavior: first, the Houthis’ flawed intelligence-gathering capabilities, such as using outdated information on ship ownership and trade links to inform targeting and a limited detection and reconnaissance infrastructure. Second, some Houthi armaments have inherent constraints, such as weapon solutions fitted with limited navigation and propulsion systems to strike moving targets at long-range distances.

This section investigates in detail the Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in and around the Red Sea between November 19, 2023, and July 31, 2024. To ensure accuracy, the article elaborates only on incidents claimed by Houthi media

accounts and confirmed by independent sources, such as the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) and the US Central Command (CENTCOM). Data on the Houthi maritime attacks are shown in Graph 1, which organizes strikes on merchant vessels into six categories by the weapons system or tactics employed. The first category comprises ballistic and cruise missiles in anti-ship configurations (ASBMs and ASCMs) and more generic missiles that have yet to be precisely identified. The second category regroups UAVs, one-way-attack drones (OWADs), and generic drone labeling. The third category includes visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) operations and swarm boat attacks. The fourth group comprises USVs. The fifth category is for attacks of unknown type. Finally, the sixth category regroups attacks with more than one weapon system. Graph 1 presents successful strikes that hit ships and failed strikes that either missed the target or were shot down. Most importantly, Graph 1 shows the total number of attacks per month, a single attack might comprise more than one assault and more than one projectile shot on the same vessel.



Graph 1. Houthi Attacks on Commercial Ships by Weapons System/Tactics Employed, November 2023 – July 2024

As the data from Graph 1 highlights, missile systems represent the Houthis' weapon of choice to attack commercial ships transiting regional waters. Although it remains challenging to identify the kind of missile used for each Houthi attack, information released by CENTCOM, UKMTO and Houthi social media accounts indicate that a significant number of strikes have been conducted with ASBMs. With large warheads, advanced terminal electro-optical infrared seekers, and powerful engines allowing a high on-target-closing speed, ASBMs have a combat

edge over both ASCMs and UAVs when engaging a moving target. Indeed, Houthi ASBM attacks have displayed a higher lethality rate compared to other air weapons systems. For instance, ASBM strikes caused both the first ship's total loss, sinking the Belize-flagged chemical tanker *Rubymar*, and the first civilian casualties, killing three seafarers on board the Barbados-flagged bulk carrier *True Confidence*.⁽⁹⁷⁾ Although the Houthis have showcased their possession of a large inventory of ASBMs,⁽⁹⁸⁾ the *Mohit*, a converted version of a Soviet-made SA-2 surface-to-air missile, and the *Asef*, an indigenized variant of the Iranian *Khaleej-e Fars* ASBM, are generally considered to be the main ASBMs used in the Houthi anti-shipping campaign. Although ASBMs are the main protagonists of the Houthi maritime offensive, the Yemeni insurgent group has also sporadically resorted to ASCMs to target merchant ships, as showcased by the strike on the Palau-flagged bulk cargo carrier *M/V Verbena*.⁽⁹⁹⁾

The Yemeni insurgent group has also deployed UAVs, primarily the *Sammad* and *Shahed* one-way-drone families, to conduct attacks on commercial maritime traffic in the Red Sea. The extended range of UAVs makes them an effective weapon to target ships in waters further afield from the Bab al-Mandab Strait. However, despite their broad attack range, the limited speed of UAVs compared to missile systems provides international naval coalitions more time to detect and neutralize them. Graph 1 shows that UAV strikes have gradually decreased since the onset of the Houthi maritime offensive. It is important to highlight that the Houthis have also launched multilayered air attacks, such as the barrages of missiles and UAVs targeting the Marshall Islands-flagged bulk carrier *Caravos Harmony* and the Singapore-flagged bulk carrier *Federal Masamune* on January 9, 2024.

Graph 1 indicates that VBSS operations played a significant role in the initial stage of the Houthi maritime attacks. Indeed, it was precisely with the seizure of the *Galaxy Leader* by a Mil Mi-8 helicopter-borne commando of Houthi marines that the Houthis kickstarted its offensive in the Red Sea basin. Eight days after the *Galaxy Leader* incident, the Liberian-flagged tanker *Central Park* was targeted by a hijacking assault.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ Although it remains unclear if the attack was the result of a Houthi assault or an act of piracy by criminal groups active in regional waters, the fact that the target of the hijacking was a vessel owned by the international ship management company *Zodiac Maritime*, a subsidiary of *Ofer Global* owned by the Israeli tycoon *Eyal Ofer*, suggests that the Houthis were behind the attack.

As indicated in Graph 1, Houthi attempts at VBSS operations peaked in December 2023. On December 13, 2023, a Houthi flotilla of skiffs attacked the Marshall Islands-flagged tanker *Ardmore Encounter*. As attempts to board the commercial vessel failed, missiles were shot from Houthi-controlled territories at the ship.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ Two days later, the Houthis attempted a VBSS assault on the Liberian-flagged container ship *MSC Alanya*, which managed to escape the boarding attempt by engaging in evasive maneuvers.⁽¹⁰²⁾ On December 18, 2023, the Marshall Islands-flagged bulk carrier *Magic Vela* was the target of an attempted boarding. Finally, between December 30 and December 31, 2023, a flotilla of Houthi

speedboats launched repeated VBSS assaults on the Singapore-flagged container ship Maersk Hangzhou after having fired ASBMs at the commercial ship. The aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower and the guided-missile destroyer USS Gravelly answered the Maersk Hangzhou's distress call and deployed helicopters to provide protection to the container ship. As the Houthi speedboats ignored verbal warnings and opened fire on US Navy rotorcraft, the latter returned fire in self-defense, sinking three out of four small craft and killing a dozen crewmembers.⁽¹⁰³⁾ Since the Maersk Hangzhou's attempted hijacking, the Houthis have refrained from engaging in VBSS actions. Helicopter-borne commandos and boarding parties on speedboats are pretty vulnerable to detection and interception by international naval coalitions active in the Red Sea basin, a tactical risk that the Houthis appeared increasingly unwilling to take.

When it comes to USVs, Graph 1 highlights that the Houthis have deployed bomb-boats only in the latest phases of their Red Sea campaign. The Yemeni insurgent group conducted the first successful USV attack on June 12, 2024, when a fishing skiff converted into a WBIED struck the Liberian-flagged bulk carrier MV Tutor. An unidentified airborne projectile also hit the bulk carrier, according to the ship's master. The USV strike resulted in the killing of one seafarer and inflicted critical damage to the ship's hull, causing severe flooding and loss of power. Ultimately, the MV Tutor sank six days after the attack.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Following the MV Tutor bombing, the Houthis have significantly stepped up the deployment of USVs to conduct anti-shipping attacks between June and July 2024. While there are examples of USVs being fielded as a standalone weapons system, it is important to highlight that the Houthis have displayed a preference to integrate WBIEDs in multilayered attacks that combine the use of bomb-boats and airborne projectiles, such as missiles and UAVs. Indeed, four out of the six multilayered attacks conducted by the Houthis between June and July 2024 featured a USV. In addition to MV Tutor, multilayered attacks included strikes on the Liberian-flagged bulk carrier Transworld Navigator, the Panama-flagged tanker Bentely I, and the Liberian-flagged container ship Pumba.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ The significant uptick in Houthi USV attacks speaks volumes about the insurgent group's growing confidence in the WBIED's effectiveness. Although its high number of attacks to lethality ratio, a USV is not a flaw-free weapon. Houthi-made WBIEDs have a limited operational range, a constraint that forces the Houthis to rely on mother-ships to deploy USVs in close proximity to shipping lanes.

As Graph 1 showcases, a significant portion of attacks remains difficult to attribute due to a lack of verified information on the incident. In most of these cases, however, the fact that shipmasters reported explosions in the water in close proximity to the ship or minor damage to the ship's hull suggests the use of missiles and UAVs. Instead, it is more likely that USVs were deployed in the few instances when damage or impact below the ship's waterline were reported.

Although the Houthis did not conduct an under-water unmanned vehicle (UUV) attack in the timeframe analyzed, threats of submersible drones to commercial

shipping in the Red Sea cannot be underestimated. On February 17, 2024, a US-led coalition's defensive airstrike on Houthi-controlled territories in Yemen foiled the insurgent group's first attempt to launch a UUV attack since the beginning of the Red Sea campaign.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ The Houthi UUV specifics remain scant, but open-source intelligence reports suggest that they are commercial submersible drones weaponized to potentially carry naval mines, torpedoes, and explosives as a payload. The UUVs are likely to rely on relatively unsophisticated guidance and targeting systems, such as basic GPS, pre-programmed routes, and wire guidance, to home in on a target.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ Although the deployment of a Houthi submersible drone remains an isolated event, the fact that the Houthis are testing weapon solutions in the underwater warfare domain sheds light on the armed group's commitment to broadening its military arsenal of asymmetric warfare. In mid-January 2024, a US Coast Guard cutter patrolling the Arabian Sea intercepted a dhow reportedly smuggling to the Houthis components to potentially assemble UUVs, pointing at Iran's role in backing Houthi efforts in underwater warfare.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

Since the onset of the Houthi Red Sea offensive, suspicions have mounted regarding Iran's role in backing the Yemeni insurgent group's attacks on international commercial shipping. In December 2023, the White House accused Iran of complicity in the Houthi maritime attacks, pointing to Iran's paramount role in upgrading the Yemeni insurgent group's long-range strike capabilities and providing the Houthis with critical tactical intelligence to plan attacks on commercial ships.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ US CENTCOM Deputy Commander Vice Admiral Brad Cooper echoed these claims in mid-February 2024, arguing that on-the-ground IRGC-QF operatives have been backing the Houthi offensive with technical assistance and targeting information.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Several reports have identified the Iranian-flagged ship *Behshad*, an alleged IRGC spy ship regularly deployed in the Red Sea, as a critical source of intelligence information on maritime traffic for the Houthis to plan their attacks.⁽¹¹¹⁾ However, as Iran-Israel tensions heightened in the aftermath of Israel's bombing of the Iranian embassy in Damascus, the *Behshad* left the Gulf of Aden in early April 2024 and set course for Iran's Bandar Abbas port.⁽¹¹²⁾ Iran is also suspected of backing the Houthis' war effort through weapons shipments. Since the beginning of the Houthi Red Sea campaign, US naval forces have twice interdicted fishing vessels bound for Yemen smuggling weapons and lethal aid.⁽¹¹³⁾

Conclusion

Since the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014, Iran's military assistance to the Yemeni insurgent group has significantly evolved in both depth and range, as exemplified by the massive proliferation of Iran-made advanced missile and drone systems in the Houthi arsenal of long-range weapons systems. Beyond supplying weapons shipments and providing technical assistance on how to operate them, Iran has actively supported the Houthi war efforts through tactical military mentorship and guidance in setting up local weapons manufacturing lines. The multifaceted and sustained nature of Iran's military assistance to the Houthis

has undoubtedly contributed to the Yemeni armed group's power consolidation in Yemen over the past decade and to the development of the asymmetric maritime warfare capabilities that have been threatening global commercial shipping in and around the Red Sea since mid-November 2023. However, the increasing sophistication and intensification of the Iran-Houthi military and security relationship has not paralleled with a corresponding growth in Iran's clout over the command-and-control structures of the Houthis and the setting of the group's security agenda. In this regard, the Houthis display significant qualitative differences from conventional Iranian proxy forces such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite armed militias. Although the Yemeni armed group appears to be more integrated in the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" than before the outbreak of the Israel-Gaza war, the Houthis still retain significant agency over the group's internal decision-making process, the definition of its strategic priorities, and the choice of the tools to adopt to further its security ambitions. Undoubtedly, the Houthis have used the Red Sea attacks to signal the group's close ideological alignment with Iran's traditional anti-Israel and anti-US positions and showcase support to the Palestinians in the Israel-Gaza war. Yet, the pursuit of pragmatic strategic goals at the domestic and regional levels seems to represent the main driving force behind the Yemeni armed group's decision to launch the offensive against international commercial shipping.

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