

Are Houthi Operational Capabilities Strong Enough to Allow Waging War Against Israel?

Case Assessment
Political Analysis Unit

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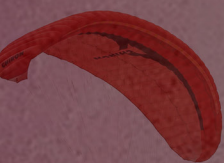


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Overview

In the early morning of October 07, Hamas managed to cross the security fence separating the Gaza Strip and the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. In response, Israeli Prime Minister declared war and launched an unprecedented bombardment campaign on Gaza Strip. The first week of the war created a state of emergency among political decision-makers around the world. Hamas attack was the first military attack launched by the Palestinians in the occupied territories and marks the most striking transformation in 50 years. Therefore, the attack and the ensuing war will cast shadow on the whole region, including Yemen.

On October 10, the Houthi leader, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, made a speech affirming his willingness to participate in the fight against Israel, and threatening to launch attacks if the United States intervened militarily in the Israeli war on Gaza.¹ His statements coincided with the pledge of armed groups in Iraq to support the Palestinians. Some threatened military action against American interests if the United States intervened militarily in the war. This raises the possibility of a regional escalation of the war, especially as these statements coincided with allegations that Iran participated in planning the Hamas-orchestrated attack, a charge denied by Tehran and stressed by the United States and Israeli experts. Iran says it will respond to Israel and the United States through the Iran-led "resistance axis," which includes the Lebanese Hezbollah, some Palestinian factions, the Houthi armed group, Syria and Shiite militias in Iraq.

Based on the assumption that the Houthis will possibly take part in the war within the Iranian-led resistance axis, this report examines the Houthi strategy and operational capabilities for intervention. It attempts to answer the following questions: What military capabilities do the Houthis possess if they decide to intervene? Do they have missiles and drones that can reach targets in Israel, or will the group focus on American targets in the region?

The Houthis in the Resistance Axis

Abdulmalik Al-Houthi had previously stated that his group would intervene in the event of a major future conflict between the Israeli occupation on the one hand and Hezbollah and the Palestinian people on the other. He repeated this affirmation again in his speech on October 10. In 2017, he said he was ready to intervene with Hezbollah and Palestine in any war.

Addressing Hezbollah Secretary-General, "Your betting on the Yemenis is accurate. Israel must warn against Yemeni participation in any of its military confrontations with Hezbollah or the Palestinian resistance."² In 2018, he said that he was "serious about sending fighters in any Israeli war against Lebanon."³ In 2020, Hamas sent a message to Hezbollah and the Houthi group (delivered to the Hezbollah) asking them to "unite the ranks" to confront Israel and respond to the threats besetting the Palestinian cause.⁴ Obviously, the Houthis are more connected to Hezbollah than they are to the Palestinian resistance movements.

In his last speech, Al-Houthi stressed that his group would intervene in the war if Israel and the United States crossed the "red lines," a statement identical with the those by Hezbollah. Before the Houthis built direct relations with Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, they were regarded as an organization under Hezbollah. Special relations predating the six wars (2004-2008) developed between the two sides. Hezbollah openly and actively participated in the last ongoing war, including in military planning. Reports show that the Houthis copy Hezbollah's plans and military media.⁵ Houthi elements receive combat training in southern Lebanon. A team of Hezbollah experts also work in Yemen.⁶ The party has a seat in the Governing Council, the group's supreme decision-making body.⁷ In 2019, the Houthi group announced that it had raised about \$300,000 to support Hezbollah in Lebanon at a time when the group was facing a financial crisis.⁸

In recent years, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi has increasingly put his movement under the umbrella of the Iranian-led resistance axis. The Houthis receive substantial military and political support from Iran, including ballistic missiles and drones, as well as experts, training and financing. All these forms of support were actively employed in the war against the internationally recognized government and the Saudi-led coalition. Naval mines and smart anti-ship missiles used by the Houthis to target American battleships in 2016 in the Red Sea, and targeting Saudi and Emirati commercial and oil vessels were also provided by Iran. This raises Israeli concerns that an expansion of the conflict will push Iran to target Israeli ships in Bab Al-Mandab Strait as one of the operations of war, especially in light of Iranian threats to mobilizing the resistance axis.

Israel, Yemen and the Red Sea

The Palestinian issue occupies much space in the Yemenis' interests, regardless of their differences, and notwithstanding the ongoing war that has been raging on for nine years.

In a rare scene of solidarity, hundreds of thousands of Yemenis took to the streets of the main cities in support of the Palestinian cause and protested the crimes of the Israeli occupation against the residents of the Gaza Strip. Yemen, like other countries, supports the two-state solution, according to the Arab initiative proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002. Yemen boycotts the Israeli occupation, even though no relevant law has been enacted. It continues to enforce the main aspect of the boycott, and does not trade with Israel.

Although there are no relations of any kind between Yemen and the Israeli occupation, and they do not have common borders as they are separated by 2000 km, both overlook the Red Sea. Therefore, even before recent events, the Israelis viewed Houthi control of areas in the Red Sea as a threat to Israeli national security. Since the 1950s, Israel has viewed the Arab presence in the Red Sea as a direct threat. In the 1960s, it supported the imamate regime against the Egyptian-backed republic for fear that its ships would be targeted. Israel increasingly sent more spies to northern and southern Yemen to find out what the two regimes planned. The government of the republic in the north arrested an Israeli spy in 1972.⁹ In the 1973 war, Bab Al-Mandab Strait was closed to Israeli shipping.

Before the October 1973 War, Israel sent a commandoes group to the deserted Yemeni island of Zuqar to build a radar and radio station.¹⁰ Since then, Israel began working to undermine Yemen's control of the navigation corridor in the southern Red Sea.¹¹ It also tried to impose it as an international maritime corridor and struggled to prevent viewing it as Arab and to preclude any Yemeni influence in it. It also worked to thwart any coalition of the countries of the Red Sea coast, especially any coalition that would bring Yemen with the countries of the Horn of Africa, with the aim of protecting its shipping in the Red Sea and its access to the high seas.

Israel relies on the United States and the fleets of other countries to secure the navigation of Israeli vessels in the Red Sea, but in the past two years it seemed that it was no longer able to secure such protection as Iranian attacks on Israeli ships from the waters of the Arabian Gulf have expanded to the Arabian Sea. Israel fears that targeting will expand to the Red Sea. There have been increasing calls in Israel since early 2023 to re-establish a maritime leadership in the Red Sea,¹² especially as trade with the region accounts for 25% of Israeli exports and imports: 7% of Israeli exports and imports pass through Eilat, while the rest of the traffic passes through the Haifa and Ashdod ports via Suez Channel.

Obviously, Israel has already started attempts to return to the Red Sea through participation in international alliances, especially after the signing of the Abraham Accords and normalization with the UAE and Bahrain. The latest American options in this direction confirm that after the Abraham Accords, the Pentagon moved Israel from the US European Command to the US Central Command to enhance closer cooperation between the Gulf kingdoms and Israel. In November 2021, through US Navy Central Command coordination, Israel, conducted unprecedented naval military exercises with the UAE and Bahrain in the Red Sea. The training focuses on maritime “visit, board, search and seizure tactics” and aimed to “ensure freedom of navigation” and international trade.¹³

The Israeli approach to the Abraham Accords (normalization) with the United Arab Emirates indicates that it seeks to have a foothold to influence Yemeni politics and perhaps obtain a position that would help it implement the 1970s strategy to monitor international navigation from the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. So, reports reveal that Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv are building an intelligence control base in one of the Socotra Archipelago islands, which are nominally subject to the control of the internationally recognized Yemeni government, but are in reality under the control of the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC). However, none of this is possible any longer after the Israeli attack on Gaza and the possibility of the conflict expanding to a regional one, with Iran and its agents being at the heart of these transformations.

The Red Lines

Despite the concerns of the countries of the region, including Iran, Tehran's agents say they will intervene in the war if “red lines” are crossed.¹⁴ It is not known precisely what the red lines are! The Houthis maintain that this will happen if the United States intervenes in the war— as is the case with the Shiite militias in Iraq, but Iran stated that it will intervene in the event of an Israeli land invasion of the Gaza Strip.¹⁵ This is confirmed by a Hamas leader who stated that the “enemy's” land invasion of Gaza will prompt the “resistance axis” to enter the war “under the slogan of unity of fronts,”¹⁶ which was raised in 2021 to organize the team of Iran's agents in the region.

Over the past years, in the context of enhancing its domination in the region and the strategy of “creating a balance of terror”¹⁷ Iran managed to make the armed groups in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, which were fighting largely separately, see themselves as belonging to the same team.

Many of their leaders have received training in Iran or by Hezbollah—the most powerful Iranian faction. These groups exchange information on increasing missile firepower and enhancing their surveillance capabilities through drones. They work under the Iranian leadership or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, while Iranian intervention varies from one group to another.

Tehran believes that targeting its agents in the region, including the Lebanese Hezbollah, will weaken its influence. However, it is not clear how Iran and its regional agents will react if the Israeli occupation launched a large-scale attack on Gaza. Iranian officials do confirm that Tehran will not enter the war directly, but through its agents in the region,¹⁸ including the Houthis in Yemen. Abdulmalik Al-Houthi stated that his group is in full coordination with the resistance axis "to do what we can."¹⁹

Based on the reading of Tehran's relationship with Hezbollah and their relationship to the Houthis, the latter—like the rest of Iran's proxies—will interfere in the event Hezbollah enters the war. This creates the following equation: the more Israel uses lethal force to achieve its goal of trying to eliminate Palestinian resistance, the more pressure on Hezbollah to intervene, which prompts other Iranian proxies to intervene, each according to their operational capabilities and geographical location. Unlike Hezbollah and Syria, and partly Iraq, Yemen is geographically distant from Israel, which makes the Houthi operational capabilities against Israel more complicated.

Houthi Operational Capabilities against Israel

The Houthi attacks in January 2022 on the UAE capital, Abu Dhabi, besides the attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais in Saudi Arabia in 2019, marked a shift showing the extent of the growth of the group's capabilities during the ongoing long war that started in 2014. It also sheds lights on Iran's transfer of long-distance capabilities to the Houthis and the possibility of using Yemen as a base to put pressure on Israel. After the Houthi attacks on Abu Dhabi, the Israeli Defense Forces redeployed missile defense batteries in southern Israel to protect against any potential Houthi attacks.²⁰

As for Israel, the Houthi case is a mysterious "black box" in the arena of a far and completely unfamiliar confrontation. This is further complicated by inaccurate information about decision-making and organization with the group. The Houthis are a hybrid case of militia fighters possessing advanced military capabilities akin to those owned by states. Houthi control of the weapons of the Republic of Yemen after their seizure of the capital, Sana'a in September 2014 helped create this reality.

The operational capabilities of the Houthis can be examined by studying Houthi maritime and long-range military capabilities.

1. Ballistic Missiles and Drones

The concrete Houthi threat to Israel is the ability of the Houthis to launch long-range ballistic or smart missile and explosive-laden drone attacks. To hit targets inside Israel, the Houthis will need a 1,600 km range firepower as a minimum to reach targets in southern Israel and the port of Eilat.

Obviously, some of the Houthi ballistic missiles and drones have been tested in the Abu Dhabi attacks; namely, Quds-2 and Zulfiqar missiles and Sammad-3 drones that have a range of 1,700 km. Between 2022 and September 2023, the Houthis announced introducing a number of ballistic missiles that have not been tested due to the more or less effective truce that started in April 2022.

In September 2023, the Houthis paraded their new weapons. Some of the displayed military capabilities include many types of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones that have not been previously displayed, nor had the Houthis announced using them before. These weapons are capable of reaching Israel and include the winged cruise missile, Quds-4, which is the last version of the Quds missile family. Differences between these generations of missiles are not known, but one of these differences has to do with the range. It is believed that its range is between 1,350-2,000 km. Quds-4 is the Yemeni designation of the Yaweh of the Iranian Soumar family.

The Houthis did not disclose the range of their new missiles, including the liquid-fuel ballistic missile, Aqeel. It is believed that its range of this missile is 1,900 km. Aqeel is the Yemeni designation of an Iranian missile that belongs to the Qiyam family. As for Toufan, which the Houthis describe as a strategic liquid-fuel ballistic missile, it has a range of 2,000 km and is the Yemeni name for the Iranian "Qadar-F" missile.

Other missiles displayed by the Houthis in September 2022 include Quds-3, a winged liquid-fuel cruise missile that has a range of up to 1,500 km, Falaq: a liquid-fuel ballistic missile that has a range of up to 1,500 km, and Hatim that uses solid fuel and is the Yemeni name of the Iranian strategic Kheiber Shekan, unveiled in early 2022, which has a range of 1,500 km (theoretically sufficient to target Israel).

Another component of the Houthi long-range firepower are the explosive-laden suicide drones of which the Houthis have a big arsenal. The most important of those drones is Sammad-3, which targeted Abu Dhabi in 2022 and Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019. Other drones unveiled in September 2023²¹ include Wa'eed-2, which carries 50 kg of explosives and has a range of 2,000 km. Although these drones can cause limited damage to the Israeli infrastructure due to the relatively small weight of the warhead, the Houthis send them in groups along with ballistic missiles. Such attacks can cause damage to the port of Eilat, airports and other installations that disrupts their normal functioning.

2. Maritime Capabilities

Another threat to Israeli maritime and economic activity stems from Houthi attacks on Israeli ships, or those operating for Israel in the Red Sea along Bab Al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden. The Houthis have always been a global concern to international navigation, regardless of the Palestinian issue and Israel's recent war on the Gaza Strip. The Houthis are capable of interrupting oil traffic and raising the cost of insurance on ships that sail near Yemeni territorial waters.

In September 2023, the Houthis unveiled Asif-1, a land-based solid-fuel ballistic missile that can hit visual and thermal targets. It has a range of 400 km. Tankeel, a solid-fuel land-to-sea missile, with a ground-to-ground version, has a range of up to 500 km and resembles the Zuhair/Raad 500 missile, which was developed by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Faliq, a land-to-sea solid-fuel missile, has a range of 140 km. Siggeel, a winged solid- and liquid-fuel cruise missile, has a range of 180 km and can target any point in the Red Sea from any point inside Yemen.

Apparently, many long-range land-to-sea cruise missiles have been developed. These include Sayyad, which was fitted with an anti-detection radar sensor and has an alleged range of 800 km and Badr Z-0 cruise missile, which has apparently been equipped with an electro-optical and infrared systems. The Houthis claim that the latter is capable of engagement with land and sea targets. In addition to other missiles that had been unveiled earlier, these are anti-ship missiles that are among Iran's latest weapons, and are capable of causing heavy damage to ships.

Another marine threat used by the Houthis is the suicide drone boats like those used in targeting the Saudi frigate, Madinah, in January 2017. The attack was specifically meant to cause damage to the warship without the drone boats being detected by the radar quickly. The suicide sea drones are usually dealt with as fishing boats. The Houthis also use naval mines. It is indicative that marine mine incidents have increased over the past years, and have caused damage to ships. It is worth mentioning that the Houthis have more than 15 types of naval mines.

What targets might the Houthis hit?

Based on analysis of the attacks carried out by the Houthis during the period 2004-2023, most of those attacks were carried out within Yemeni territory. There were no attacks outside the borders of Yemen except on neighboring Saudi Arabia, which was targeted in most of those attacks, and the United Arab Emirates. These attacks were mainly linked to the Yemeni war (2015-2023), since the two countries support the internationally recognized government. Therefore, expanding the scope of the attacks to distant targets and crises will constitute a new dilemma and stage for the armed group.

The Houthis may view the Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip and expanding it to Lebanon and Syria as an appropriate moment to show their commitment to their declared ideological slogan, but their actions are linked to a green light or request from Iran.

Because Iran runs the "resistance axis," any reaction from outside Palestine will be coordinated by members of the axis in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. It is linked to either the Israeli land incursion into Gaza, or Hezbollah's full engagement in the war instead of its limited simple operations and skirmishes with Israeli forces that have been typical of the first 13 days of the Israeli war on Gaza.

The US unjustified deployment of aircraft carriers and other warships to the Mediterranean in support of Israel has increased tension in the region, and raised the anger of the US Gulf allies, especially since no aircraft carrier had been deployed to the Gulf in support of regional security in the face of fears of the Iranian threat. By contrast, Iran's concerns over targeting its proxies in the region have increased, following the targeting of Palestinian resistance, especially in view of the statements of the Israeli Prime Minister that Israel's war will change the face of the region and increase deterrence.

Therefore, Iran will ensure that the Houthis shall act in tandem with the resistance axis in Iraq and Syria and perhaps in other countries, and shall launch attacks the exact nature of which is not known. Such attacks might include:

1. Attacking US targets and allies: The Houthis may target American bases and forces in the region. They might strike at the American military base in Abu Dhabi, for example, or strike UAE targets directly, especially as they blame it for the normalization agreements with the Israeli occupation. Although Israel withdrew its ambassadors from the countries of the Abraham Accords, its embassy in the UAE is still open. It is basically an Iranian goal, as Tehran has always shown its anger at the UAE normalization with Israel.

American targets are not limited to military bases, but also include American ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Missiles such as Sayyad, Tankeel and Asif-1 or suicide bomb boats can target American battleships. The Houthis had previously targeted American battleships in 2016. Reports indicate that the United States has warned the Houthis against intervening in the Israeli war on Gaza.

2. Attacking Israel: The Houthis may launch attacks on Israeli territory. They can overcome their lack of understanding of the new battlefield, especially as coordination with the Palestinian and Lebanese factions means overcoming this dilemma. It seems that this operation has been already launched. On October 19, an American warship off Yemen's coast intercepted 3 cruise missiles and a number of drones fired from Houthi-controlled areas. They were believed to be fired towards southern Israel. This is considered a confirmation of the extent of the group's capabilities.

3. Maritime attacks: This is an unbridled Iranian and Houthi card. Yemen oversees Bab al-Mandab Strait, which can be used to pressure the West to pressure Israel to stop its military operations in Gaza and to stop their support and armament of Israel. The Houthis are also capable of interrupting international navigation. Although this scenario is technically possible, its chances of success are practically low. This region is the locale of international military bases and the theater of multiple international forces. Therefore, strengthening freedom of movement around the bottleneck on this vital maritime passage is an important goal for an increasing number of marine work teams operating in the region, such as the United States, France, Russia, China, Egypt and even Turkey.

Hence, the Houthi ability to disrupt marine navigation or cause serious damage to international navigation is limited.

Therefore, the Houthis will have to ensure getting accurate data in order to pose a direct operational threat to Israel. Radar systems operating along the western coast of Yemen will play a decisive role in detecting and identifying marine assets in the region and may enable them to target them with anti-ship missiles or seize them altogether as they hijacked the UAE-flagged vessel, *Rawabi*, in early 2022. In September 2023, the Houthis displayed a number of marine radars that could help them obtain information.

However, it does not provide a final response to the main challenge facing the efficacy of these operations in the Israeli context; namely, the ability to attack clearly Israeli targets. To do this, the Houthis will have to choose from a variety of options, all of which are defective:²²

- **Attacking Israeli naval ships:** Undoubtedly, this is an essential goal, but it is very rare in the areas that the Houthis can reach. Yet, such a target will be threatened even if it is 800 km away from Yemeni lands.

- **Attacking commercial ships owned by Israeli companies:** There are about 300 ships of this kind around the world, most of which do not sail along the Yemeni coast. They also display non-Israeli flags that may hide their identity and make it difficult to identify their owners. With the help of Iranian intelligence, it is possible to know whenever a ship would pass in the appropriate field of Houthi targeting.

- **Disrupting the operation of one of the shipping lines that affect the supply of goods to Israel:** Such an attack requires assaulting non-Israeli ships. The Houthis will be required to launch precise strikes on foreign ships on their way to Israel, most of which would apparently be Chinese; a move that would disturb Iran's good relations with China.

To overcome the complications emanating from the negative repercussions of their involvement in a potential attack on Israel, the Houthis may open Yemeni territory, including islands, to the Palestinian resistance, the Lebanese Hezbollah, or even the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and provide them with information and training to launch individual attacks on ships of other nationalities— without direct Houthi involvement in the process— and withdraw to the Yemeni lands where they are protected against prosecution.

Yemen has a precedent in this regard, as happened in mid-June 1971, when left-wing fighters from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) targeted an Israeli-rented tanker, Bahr Al-Marjan, in an attack launched from the Yemeni island of Zuqar as the tanker entered Bab Al-Mandab Strait on its way to Eilat. ²³

- **Deploying fighters:** If Israel and the Lebanese Hezbollah are indulged in a long-term war of attrition that requires sending Houthi fighters to strengthen Hezbollah's trained manpower, the Houthis are ready to send fighters. The Houthi leader declared that he had informed Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, of his willingness to send fighters to Lebanon to fight Israel. ²⁴

Dilemma and Confusion

Despite the Houthi capabilities and their association with the Iranian axis, waging a war outside the Yemeni borders is a risky adventure for the armed group that can lead to its isolation in the region and beyond, an outcome that Houthi officials do not want to see at present, especially in view of the group's failure to secure external international recognition. There is also the issue of the ongoing talks to end the war in Yemen in which the Houthis want to be the most influential party.

This dilemma, according to the Houthis, has created the confusion and division within the group's leadership, with one party favoring a political solution and another opting for escalation in the region. Therefore, the Houthis may resort to what they call "authorization for the leader" by the street, which would help the group leader, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, to sell his option of working within the resistance axis as an outcome of public pressure rather than the result of a group decision.

At any rate, the Houthis cannot get out of the resistance axis. Any decision made by the Houthis concerning the attack will have a major impact on the Yemeni crisis and political solution. Similarly, the hostile Houthi conduct outside the national borders may lead to placing them on US and European terrorist lists, an outcome the Houthis would do their best to prevent, especially as they had been removed from the US terrorism lists with the arrival of Biden to the White House.

Margins:

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