

Will Armed Groups be Inspired by the Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea?

Case Analysis
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Introduction:

Since mid-November, the Houthis have launched dozens of attacks on both commercial and military ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. They claim that these attacks have been conducted to support Palestinians who are facing a brutal war by the Israeli occupation in Gaza Strip since October 7th. In response, the United States and its allies have deployed naval forces to the international waterway, while the European Union has also announced a separate operation to protect shipping from these attacks. Amidst tensions, Washington is concerned about the possibility of the Gaza conflict escalating into a regional war.

The Houthi attacks have caused significant economic and security challenges in term of maritime security. They have impacted the global economy by disrupting supply chains through this crucial passage, which handles approximately 19% of the world's trade. As a result, seeking alternative routes has incurred substantial costs. On one hand, the heightened risks have led to increased insurance premiums, while on the other hand, transportation costs rise for companies that are unwilling to take risks or to pay extortions. Consequently, these companies prefer to take longer routes to avoid the chaos and security concerns associated with unmanned weapon systems.

Chaos of Unmanned Weapon Systems:

Unmanned weapon systems (UWS) are increasingly playing a significant role in conflicts worldwide, including those weapons used by rebel militias and armed groups. These systems, which include drones, unmanned boats and other autonomous vehicles, have become powerful tools capable of reshaping civil conflicts and wars, posing significant implications for international security and peace, including maritime security on the high seas. As these systems continue to be developed and widely used by militias, rebels, and extremist organizations, their capability to damage the global economy and security is on the rise. The possession of UWS technology by those groups have become one of the most significant consequences to international trade routes.

Often chaos provides a suitable environment for militias, rebels, and organizations to activate dormant capacities and revive strategies they previously failed to achieve. With the Houthi operations in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, Somali maritime piracy, which was almost eradicated in 2022, has resurfaced. Whether these new pirates receive support from the Houthis, Iran or other entities, numerous parties and groups benefit from this crisis. They silently observe regional and international reactions to the Houthi activities and seek opportunities to exploit these events as tactics to achieve their own objectives.

This is because the Houthis wage an asymmetric war, using an effective weapons technology that is inexpensive and does not require a sophisticated infrastructure to carry out their operations. This makes rebels, militias, and extremist groups, as well as pirates, admire their tactics along the coasts of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, extending to African seas, the Pacific Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea. It serves as an inspiring experience for these smaller, rebellious, and extremist organizations-even pirates- on how to deeply influence the interests of governments and the international community to achieve their goals.

Political Strategy Temptation:

Historically, naval warfare has been primarily limited to official state armies. It was rare for armed groups to engage in maritime attacks against powerful state forces from their controlled territories. However, the Houthis have capitalized on their experience of rebellion over the past two decades to carry out naval and air attacks while concealing their presence in their controlled areas. They have taken advantages from the previous decade-long war with the internationally recognized Yemeni government, which was supported by a Saudi-led coalition and has been engaged in conflict with the Houthi rebellion since 2014.

While the escalation in the Red Sea is as an Iranian strategy to demonstrate its ability to close the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Houthis need certain supporting factors to achieve this strategy. These factors include having a just cause, an organized group (carrier) and popular sentiment. Thus, launching attacks, such as those initiated on November 19th from Yemeni territory, exploited the Palestinian cause, which is supported by the Yemeni people, as well as Arab and Islamic nations. This tactical approach brings the Houthis closer to their ultimate strategy of gaining full control over Yemen and exerting regional influence.

The Houthi rebels have an organized structure with multiple units for sustaining combat and acquiring resources, along with a hierarchical leadership structure. Furthermore, they tap into popular sentiment fuelled by outrage over Israeli brutality in Gaza and the exposure of American and Western support for what is viewed as ongoing genocide, witnessed daily on television screens. The toll of this conflict has resulted in killing more than 30,000 civilians, mostly women and children.

The Houthi leader frequently uses emotive language and real images in his speeches to communicate with the public, evoking feelings of solidarity, defiance, and collective struggle against injustice, oppression, and international arrogance. Through these speeches, he justifies the group's increasing armament and the growing capabilities of their missiles, drones, and unmanned ships, which rely on Iranian support and technology.

The presence of these three elements enables rebel organizations and armed groups to perceive themselves as possessing capability and legitimacy, while enhancing a positive image based on moral superiority. Consequently, the Houthis have effectively marketed themselves as fighters and defenders of the oppressed in the region, presenting themselves as upholders of values derived from Arab and Islamic solidarity. By doing that, they claim that their internal wars is based on the same. They present themselves as group of righteousness and justice, providing an advantage that rebels and armed groups have been unable to achieve, even after gaining effective control over specific territories and ruling these areas, or their successful coup against the state institutions.

Smart Weapon Attacks:

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, advanced weaponry such as ballistic missiles, guided cruise missiles, and drones were primarily privilege to superpowers. However, scientific and technological advancements, coupled with technology transfers and the willingness of states to equip their allies and armed groups, have led to the uncontrolled proliferation of these weapons. Notably, this trend is evident in the emergence of a new generation of Iranian ballistic missiles with guided warheads, which have demonstrated high accuracy in attacks like the one on the Ain al-Assad base in January 2020.

Non-state groups have also benefited from the availability of guided cruise missile technology. These missiles possess the precision necessary to target specific objectives, such as slow-moving or stationary ships and buildings. It is almost certain that these missiles can successfully target “soft” objectives that are prone to explosions and have flammable properties, including oil refineries, stations, ports, and tankers.

While rebel groups, militias, and extremist organizations are not excluded to access to ballistic and precision-guided missiles, they often focus on getting low-cost, highly effective, and impactful weapons. For the Houthis, they have shown enthusiasm for drones, since 2017, followed by ballistic missiles and recently unmanned boats. They declared 2019 as the “Year of Drones” and 2022 as the “Naval Force Year.” According to a United Nations report in November, a revised textbook by the Houthi group for sixth-grade students, includes a dialogue where a person after lunch explains to a family member that locally manufactured Drones have reached “enemy territory”. They are equipped with sophisticated features such as high autonomy, mapping systems, and precise cameras.

According to UN investigators and other experts, the Houthis use drones and unmanned boats as if they were self-destructing missiles or bombs, aiming to cause explosions and maximize damage. They utilize fixed-wing drones with a range of up to 800 miles and build small remotely guided boats, both of which are loaded with explosives. These weapons have been referred to as “Suicide Drones” and “Suicide Ships” during the Houthi group’s conflict against the internationally recognized government.

The Houthi strategy of waging asymmetric warfare compels their adversaries to spend tens of millions of dollars and deplete their missile stockpiles (including air-to-air missiles), in order to protect ships or vital installations targeted by the group. The cost of intercepting Houthi attacks in the Red Sea is a concern for the Pentagon ; as shooting down a drone or self-destructing unmanned boat with missiles costing \$2 million each places a significant financial burden on organized armies. However, the cost is relatively minimal for rebel groups and extremist organizations. The more drone attacks the Houthis carry out, the greater the cost and disruption they can inflict on their adversaries, potentially compelling them to scale back or acquiesce to their demands.

Drone Attacks Strategy:

The Houthi rebels have various types of drones that have been used during the war in the past decade. Information suggests that the technology and materials for these drones come from Iran. Over the past ten years, the United States claims to have captured 28 Iranian arms shipments destined for the Houthis, including components for ballistic missiles and drones, with two shipments captured as recently as last January.

The Houthi tactics in drone attacks involve targeting a single objective using multiple drones simultaneously to maximize the impact. Often, ballistic missiles are also involved in these attacks. One of the most significant instances of the Houthis' drone usage was in September 2019 when they targeted the Saudi Arabian oil facilities in Al-Baqaiq and Khurais. Using 25 drones and a ballistic missile, they triggered fires and disrupted 5% of the world's oil supplies, resulting in a 19% increase in oil prices.

What increases the temptation of extremist groups and rebellious organizations in the region is that the use of drones serves two purposes: punishment and propaganda. Drones enable them to strike deep into their enemies' territories, targeting their vital infrastructure as well as assassinating military and political leaders. The Houthis demonstrated this capability when they targeted the Al-Anad Air Base in January 2019, assassinating Brigadier General Mohammed Saleh Tammah, the head of military intelligence, along with other military leaders. This helps these groups to build intellectual image that they are resilient in the face of their militarily-aligned adversaries.

It appears that the Houthi experience with drones have influenced other groups as well. The Southern Transitional Council (a separatist entity supported by the United Arab Emirates) has its own drones, as do other pro-government forces. However, there is no information available regarding the effectiveness of these drones or whether they are similar to the suicide drones used by the Houthis or not. Nevertheless, the strategy of drone attacks by the Houthis has been adopted by at least two other groups, one in Yemen and another outside the country.

Houthi Inspiration for Al-Qaeda in Yemen

In 2023, the Al-Qaeda used drones in the same way the Houthis did. It is not unlikely that they may use the same technology in the Red Sea to pose a new threat to the West. Al-Qaeda could generalize its experience to the branches beyond borders. The group has strengthened its relationship with al-Shabaab, who are on the other side of the Red Sea in Africa. They control some areas and fight the government in Somalia. The group also has a presence in other African countries.

A shift in strategy was observed in 2023 for Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as they redirected their activities towards the southern provinces instead of targeting the Houthi group in Al-Bayda.

They used drones to target pro-government forces in Shabwa. This shift means a change in the group's strategy to become again a cross-border organization rather than focusing solely on Yemen. This poses a threat to maritime security in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the oil facilities in Gulf countries. The presence of Saif al-Adel, the actual leader of Al-Qaeda, in Iran may be one of the motivations behind this strategy shift.

As a result of internal divisions within Al-Qaeda and clashes with the Islamic State (ISIS), these techniques and experiences could reach either organization in Yemen or in the Horn of Africa countries. Most extremist movements that launch attacks against the West and rebel groups in the region and the world either derive from or interact with these two groups.

Targeting U.S. and Western Forces:

Increasing anger in the Middle East and North Africa towards the United States due to its support for Israeli military operations in Gaza has provided armed groups like the Houthis with an opportunity to enhance their popularity through attacks on American forces in the Red Sea. This serves as an inspiration for other armed groups to adopt the Houthi's tactics in recruiting new members.

1- Drones:

The low cost of asymmetric warfare using Drones is an enticing factor for these groups compared to the gains they will achieve. In February, various groups supported by Iran reportedly used a similar tactic to attack Tower 22 in Jordan, resulting in the deaths of three U.S. soldiers and injuring around forty others, according to U.S. officials. The threat could quickly extend to U.S. and Western embassies.

2- Unmanned Boats:

Although there is insufficient information about how these unmanned boats operate and are controlled! In 2023, the Houthis revealed the existence of military boats such as Asef (storm) 1, 2, and 3, Mallah, and Tufan 1, 2, and 3. Since 2018, the Saudi-led coalition has been dealing with these boats as the Houthis attacked Saudi commercial and oil ships, as well as Saudi oil ports; and ports under the control of the internationally recognized government and its loyal forces in the Red Sea.

The US Navy does not have enough information about this threat, which worries the commander of the Carrier Strike Group Two, of which the “Eisenhower” is the flagship. He considers that it’s “more of unknown threat that we do not have a lot of intel on, that could be extremely lethal- an unmanned surface vessel.” He adds “we have very little fidelity as to all the stockpiles of what they have USV-wise”. It indicates the extent of the aircraft carrier’s concern, which is fighting the Houthis from the Red Sea, “That’s one of the most scary scenarios, to have a bomb-laden, unmanned surface vessel that can go in pretty fast speeds. And if you’re not immediately on scene, it can get ugly extremely quick”.

3- Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (Small Submarines):

On February 18, U.S Central Command announced that they destroyed an unmanned underwater vehicle in the sea areas controlled by the Houthis around Yemen. This is the first time the Houthis have been observed operating underwater vehicles since the start of the attacks in November.

These unmanned vehicles, first seen in Iran, pose a serious threat to government forces and provide an advantage to armed groups and rebel organizations due to their resemblance to torpedoes, particularly the (Nazir-5) and unmanned attack type with unidirectional movement (OWA-AUVs).

These vehicles have a longer range than traditional torpedoes, making them more effective against stationary targets such as anchored ships. According to observers, the type usually used in Iran can be equipped with a short-range mast to monitor the target before the attack. It is likely more challenging to detect them compared to Drones, naval cruise missiles, and surface unmanned ships. They can be remotely operated by wire, similar to wire-guided torpedoes. This would allow them to engage moving targets. Iran may have previously used them against carriers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates.

A group’s possession of unmanned weapons systems at sea poses a serious threat to states and to commercial navigation on the high seas. The coordination of joint attacks from these systems “overwhelms ship defenses” through multi-dimensional attacks, known as a “swarm attack”. This makes it more difficult for warships and commercial ships to respond compared to facing a single threat. It adds a significant complexity to maritime counter-attack efforts and contributes to the success of rebel groups and militias.

The Houthis have followed the example of Hezbollah in Lebanon, using attacks against Israeli occupation to maintain their weapons and strength after the civil war in Lebanon. This strategy helped them gain popularity in the region and the Arab world as an Arab resistance movement. However, Hezbollah's involvement in supporting Bashar al-Assad in Syria led to a collapse of their image. The possession of this technology by the Houthis mirrors Hezbollah's ownership and support of armed militias in the region, including the Houthis.

The ambitions of the Houthis align with the aspirations of Shia sectarian organizations in Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, with a supporter and inspirer in the Arabian Peninsula. Based on that, the Houthis will seek to quickly achieve a balance of power with regional countries through these organizations to further achieve their goals in the Yemeni government. They find opportunities in drone technology, unmanned surface and underwater boats.

Multifaceted Deterrence Policy:

In addition to monitoring Houthi maritime attacks with admiration, the rebels, militias, and extremist groups focus on local, regional, and Western deterrence levels. The Houthis aim to achieve political achievements, gains, concessions, degrees of dialogue, and reconciliation based on attacks at the local and regional levels, addressing their demands. The desire of using military force by Americans to assert deterrence can be understood. It seems to be done without clear consideration of how it enhances the goals of the Houthis. It provides a failed experience for regional official states and entities in confronting rebels, militias, and extremist groups.

Despite the importance of military force, deterrence requires more than just the use of force; it requires understanding the motives, goals, preferences, and visions of the adversaries. Deterrence should not provoke these states, political and social entities to make decisions that serve the rebels. Nor should it provoke neighboring countries to recognize the strength of rebels and militias and rush to achieve agreements that transfer the national security threat of these countries and the maritime security of the region in the near future. This approach incentivizes armed groups, rebel organizations, and extremists to follow the same path.

Therefore, the proliferation and use of unmanned weapons (UW) raise significant ethical, legal, and security concerns. It is crucial to achieve deterrence and devise strategies to thwart the Houthis' attempt to inspire rebels and militias to use maritime attacks with unmanned systems. Addressing this complex issue requires a multifaceted policy involving different strategies.

Recommendations on Deterrence Strategies:

- Address the grievances associated with the Houthi threat, starting with ending the brutal war in the Gaza Strip, which is their main justification for targeting maritime navigation. It is strange to deploy American, British, and European forces to the Red Sea (while the elephant is rampaging in the room). Address all grievances related to the Palestinian issue and resolve it fairly based on the Palestinians' vision for their state and the Arab Peace Initiative. This will prevent rebels and militias from exploiting the issue in the future to achieve their internal goals and tarnish their reputation beyond borders.
- Security in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (or any other inland seas) should be managed within and by regional countries. These countries should be the main actors in presenting the initiative and leaders of any operations in the region. This does not mean excluding international participation to protect the navigation lines.
- Deterrence efforts should focus on supporting governments, building strong state institutions, and promoting peace-building initiatives that lead to long-term stability. Governmental forces should be equipped with the necessary knowledge to invest in military capabilities that can effectively confront rebel movements. Western countries should refrain from engaging in warfare or strikes in the region without explicit permission from the governments of the countries involved, in accordance with international law. This pushes societies that have a history of Western colonial oppression, and supporting violations and grievances against them to support the entity that faces the occupation, even if they reject their presence.
- Deterrence measures should support regular forces which lead to enable these countries to maintain a high level of combat readiness during peacetime and be capable of inflicting damage at the operational and strategic depth. They can also be used in signalling and reconnaissance operations, including in an official manner during combat training activities. (Hence, it is called "electronic launch simulation") in close proximity to communication lines used by rebel movements and militias.
- Establish channels for information sharing between countries to exchange information on unmanned systems, associated threats, and best practices for countermeasures. This promotes collective understanding, coordinated responses, and the utilization of expertise and resources across different nations. It also facilitates the development and deployment of advanced air and maritime defense systems that can detect and disable unmanned weapon systems. This also requires continuous innovation and adaptation to technological advancements. Concerns about technology proliferation should be overcome to fully benefit from lessons learned.

- The main threat that must be addressed through an effective and comprehensive system is to control the unregulated horizontal and vertical proliferation of unmanned weapons technology and dangerous military equipment. This means building an effective system that monitors countries that supply armed groups, or horizontally with the participation of militias in sharing weapons technology with other groups. The United States says that the Quds Force, which belongs to the international Revolutionary Guard, is the military arm of the Iranian regime that coordinates operations outside Iran's borders, supports the Houthis and other armed groups with weapons and funding. However, they also state that Tehran does not have direct control over the Houthis.
- Strengthen deterrence measures against non-state groups and fighters who use unmanned systems. This includes addressing poverty and grievances, enhancing government authority, and preventing conflict escalation. Additionally, international economic and political sanctions should be imposed on countries, parties, and groups that support rebels, even if their impact may be limited. Over time, these sanctions can discourage groups and countries from providing technology to rebels and militias.

Conclusion:

While Houthi attacks may appear isolated in a remote region of the Middle East, they have the potential to inspire other rebel groups and militias across fault lines and tensions in the Middle East and Africa. This includes posing a threat to high seas navigation in the near future. The speed and extent of this phenomenon depend on local, regional, and international reactions. In a world where the unipolar system struggles to protect the rules-based international order, periods of turmoil and instability provide opportunities for these groups and their supporters to emerge as regional powers. Therefore, these types of attacks can be used as long-term strategies, putting global maritime trade and security under continuous threat.



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