

A Competition Puts Politics and International Security at **Risk: Houthi-Iran Relationship with African Pirates**

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Introduction:-

Since November, hundreds of cargo ships have been forced to divert over 4,000 miles around the African continent to avoid attacks by Houthi militants in Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. This distraction has shifted attention away from the resurgence of Somali pirates, who had been dormant for over a decade. In February, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mahmud expressed concern, stating, “If we don’t stop it while it’s still in its infancy, it can become the same it was.” By April, there had been 28 pirate attacks on ships in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and even the Indian Ocean. These incidents have led to increase shipping costs and the requirements of security guards on board.

The Houthis, a rebel group in Yemen, have threatened to conduct naval operations in the Indian Ocean, potentially reaching as far as the Cape of Good Hope. In May, they announced plans to expand their operations to the Mediterranean Sea, describing that as an “advanced and major” move, and putting the shipping industry on high alert.

Similar to the situation in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Houthis will not only target Israeli ships but also American and British vessels, as both countries have conducted airstrikes against Houthi sites in Yemen since January. Other countries, such as China and Russia, may also be impacted. Houthi naval operations have so far taken two forms: drone and ballistic missile attacks as well as piracy incidents. A single pirate attack occurred when they hijacked the Galaxy ship on November 19, holding 25 sailors hostage.

It is important to note that the Houthis and Somali pirates are not the only actors engaged in maritime piracy in regional waters. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard has also been involved in pirate activities during this period. In April, they hijacked the Portuguese-flagged vessel “MSC Aires”. The ship, owned by UK-based Zodiac Maritime and partially owned by an Israeli businessman, is a container ship. In March, Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard’s navy, stated, “If our oil and tankers are seized anywhere in the world, we will respond in kind” (...). The era of foreign exploitation of Iranian resources with impunity has come to an end.» This indicates a shift in Iran’s approach to protecting its resources.

Consequently, the coordination between Somali pirates, the Houthis, and Iranians represents poses a significant risk not only to the shipping industry passing through Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the Suez Canal, but also to an expansive area of 5,000 km, which Iran considers its strategic depth. The Houthis' successful attacks on ships in close proximity to Yemen, as well as targeting moving targets at distant points, have a low accuracy and effectiveness. This paper, therefore, assumes that there is a high possibility that the Houthis could attack commercial vessels at distant points in the Indian Ocean with the assistance of Iranian and Somali Pirates. This also increases the possibility of piracy resurgence, which could be exploited a political tool to gain concessions in local conflicts and regional rivalries in the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa.

First: Houthi Relationship with Somali Pirates:-

Maritime piracy is the is the first internationally recognized crime defined by international law and classified as a crime under general international law. The region spanning from the southern Red Sea to the eastern Gulf of Aden is among the most prominent high-risk areas for piracy, along with the Gulf of Guinea, the Strait of Malacca, and the South China Sea.

During the early 2000s, Somali piracy posed a significant threat to ships traversing vital maritime trade routes in East Africa and off the coast of Yemen. The emergence of the Houthis as a threat to international maritime navigation is a relatively recent development. The extension of the Yemeni conflict (2014-present) to the southern Red Sea has not been regarded as "Piracy" or a hindrance to freedom of navigation in the region. This has kept the Houthis away from being held accountable under international law, which has not recognized Houthi attacks and piracy against Saudi and Emirati ships during the war as a threat to international navigation.

While there is no explicit relationship between the Houthi rebels and Somali pirates, the former has been known to collaborate with them to smuggle weapons to and from Yemen, following a decline in pirate activities due to international anti-piracy operations. Their mutual reliance has increased since 2015. Somali pirates have established connections with Houthi leaders, including Fares Mana'a, who was subjected to UN Security Council Sanctions regarding Somalia and Eritrea in 2010, based on Resolution 1844 (2008) related to combating piracy. Mana'a, an arms dealer «from the Houthis' stronghold in Sa'ada Governorate, was appointed as a state minister in the internationally unrecognized government by the Houthis in 2016. He is also linked to a wide smuggling network between Yemen and the Horn of Africa, most of those working in his network are smugglers and pirates from Somalia and Yemen.

According to reports from the UN Security Council's Expert Team on Yemen in 2017 and 2018, this network has been involved in smuggling weapons, believed to originate from Iran, to the Houthis in Yemen during the war. Despite being subject to sanctions under Security Council Resolution 2140 on Yemen, Fares Mana'a and his son Adeb continue to travel with diplomatic passports and engage in arms procurement deals from Iran to Latin American countries. They oversee the transportation of these weapons to Yemen through multiple routes, with Somali and Yemeni smugglers playing a significant role.

A 2022 report by the UN Expert Team stated, "There is a closely coordinated smuggling network operating between Yemen and Somalia, receiving weapons from a common source." Reports from the Security Council Committee established under Resolution 751 (1992) on Somalia for the years between 2017 and 2022 provide insights into how weapons are transferred from Yemen to the northern coast of Somalia. Similarly, the expert team on Yemen has provided information on eight routes used to transport weapons from Somali coasts, often serving as pirate bases of operations, to the Houthis. It is believed that the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard is behind the establishment of these routes.

It is difficult to determine the exact start date of the organized recruitment operation by the Houthi armed group in Somali piracy. However, we can identify the years 2017 and 2018 as the beginning of signs indicating enhanced links and coordination between pirate attacks and the Yemeni conflict. For example:

-In the second quarter of 2017, Somali pirates launched attacks on five commercial vessels off the coast of Somalia, marking the first series of successful attacks since 2012. This occurred during the peak of the Arab-led coalition's military operations against the Houthis and the threat of driving the Houthis out of Hodeida, a coastal city in Yemen. Officials in Puntland believed that the Houthis, or what they referred to as "Yemeni investors," were involved in these pirate activities, providing Somali pirates with logistical supplies such as ships, weapons, ammunition, GPS systems, fuel, and engines.

The Houthis have been providing funding and support to pirate networks, obtaining information about ships and navigation, gain access to equipment, and smuggle weapons purchased by the group from the black market or coming from Iran.

On November 26th, Somali pirates hijacked the Central Park vessel, which is affiliated with Israel and had 22 crew members on board. However, the U.S. destroyer USS Mason received a distress call and successfully rescued the ship and its crew. Five Somali pirates were arrested by the USS Mason while attempting to escape towards the Yemeni coast, not towards Somalia.

According to the Pentagon, around one hour and forty minutes after the U.S. forces liberated the vessel, the Houthis launched a ballistic missile towards the Central Park and the USS Mason, which landed about 10 nautical miles away from their location.

Reports before October 7th (the start of the Israeli aggression on Gaza) indicate that the Houthis have trained African refugees as part of their naval forces. These reports state that the Houthi naval force received training in September 2023 in the Al-Luhiya district in Hodeida, off the coast of the Red Sea. The training included various maritime operations, including piracy, with Somali fishermen among those recruited.

Second: Iran's Relationship with African Pirates:-

Although Iran's presence in the Horn of Africa began belatedly in the mid-2000s, Tehran has far greater ambitions than its actual tools in the new regional competition for influence in this strategic region. It has achieved only rare successes. In addition, it is also clear that the Horn of Africa is important to the Iranian regime not because of its specific value, but because of the array of interests and competition through which the Islamic Republic of Iran can weaken the stances of its rivals. Since 2008, Iranian warships— which protect Iranian commercial shipping— have conducted anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia. But this has not prevented Iran from employing pirates to smuggle weapons to armed groups in Somalia or Yemen, which of course have ties with Iran. Iranians also employ pirate networks to smuggle illicit goods for the Somali armed groups, including al-Shabaab (al-Qaeda's East African branch), and sell these goods through Iran, where they are labeled as Iranian products.

Iran's cooperation with piracy and smuggling networks in the Gulf of Aden is part of its strategy to exert influence in East Africa and Yemen. Apart from the general principle of exporting the revolution— as proclaimed by Ayatollah Khomeini as the responsibility of the Muslim community and the oppressed poor- Iranian foreign policy revolves around the concepts of “strategic depth” and “resistance” during the last two decades. These two concepts determine Tehran's orientation towards the outside world and shape its relationship with it. In addition to Iranian leaders' assertion that their country's borders extend to Yemen and East Africa, referred to as the “strategic depth,” Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei considered Africa in 2019 as the “geography of resistance.” Since Iran lacks sufficient

financial, economic, cultural, and diplomatic resources in East Africa, where Gulf Arab countries can easily be better than Iranian offer, it goes to be a troublemaker by influencing the active and influential parties in East African security to gain an advantage over its competitors.

The most prominent of these issues is the maritime threat through piracy, which is considered an effective tool for Iran to compete and bargain, not only through hijacking ships and threatening commercial vessels but also in smuggling weapons and humans, obtaining maritime information such as monitoring ships. They may even use them to launch drone attacks from their locations or from hijacked merchant ships.

A part of the relationship between the Houthis, Somali pirates, and Iran is evident in the smuggling of Iranian weapons to the Houthis. This connection involves Somali pirates and smugglers working with Iranian officials. For instance, in 2015, the Australian frigate HMAS Melbourne intercepted a weapons shipment on a fishing vessel named Nasir near the Somali coast. The vessel had departed from the port of Chabahar in Iran. During the operation, the vessel primarily communicated through a single Iranian shared number. The fishing ship captain was also in contact with known arms dealers connected to former pirate Issa Mahmoud Yousef. These details were also found in the seizure of three other fishing vessels by the US Fifth Fleet or international coalition forces, as mentioned in a 2016 report by UN Security Council's expert team regarding Yemen.

Third: Iran- Houthi Alliance with Pirates:-

Moving on to the Houthi-Iranian alliance with pirates, the Houthis have announced their expansion of operations to the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. However, despite possessing weapons such as suicide drones and missiles with a range of nearly 2,000 km, their effectiveness in targeting moving ships is limited. The success of their operations is closely tied to the proximity of the ships to Yemeni waters. Therefore, a high level of coordination between the Houthis, Somali pirates, Iran, and their allies, known as the "Axis of Resistance" and the "geography of resistance," presents a significant possibility for the Houthis to project themselves as a formidable force beyond Yemen's waters.

In addition to the current cooperation between the Houthis, Somali pirates, and Iran in continuous smuggling weapons, humans, and obtaining information about commercial ships and their routes, and troubling them in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, there are new areas where they could cooperate to fulfill the Houthis' threat to expand their operations can be pointed out: -

- Using drones to launch attacks from areas where pirates and their allied tribes are present on the Somali coast, with support from Houthi militants or Africans trained by the Houthis. They could also target areas controlled by Al-Shabaab, which has connections with Iran, pirate networks, and smuggling. These attacks could extend beyond Yemen.

- The Houthis or Somali pirates can use sailboats forward operation bases as for conducting asymmetric warfare, including the use of remotely controlled explosive ships and sticky mines to target commercial ships in the Indian Ocean.
- The Iranians and the Houthis can provide Somali pirates with required training, equipping them with the necessary information to carry out attacks outside the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean, with the endorsement of the Houthis. The United States suspects their involvement in the attack on the Liberian-flagged tanker “Kim Bliss” off the coast of India in December of last year.
- Iran can also carry out maritime operations in the Indian Ocean, with the Houthis officially claiming responsibility. This would not be new, as the United States and Saudi Arabia have accused Tehran of being behind the attacks on the oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019, which are located 1,000 km away from Yemeni territory, despite Iran’s denial of involvement.
- Launching attacks in the Mediterranean Sea against commercial ships by the “Axis of Resistance,” including Hezbollah in Lebanon or Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria, with the Houthis claiming responsibility.

Fourth: Risks of the Tripartite Alliance:-

The high level of coordination between the Houthis and Iran in maritime piracy poses risks to maritime and regional security in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This extends beyond the current stage, where the Houthis and Iranians claim that maritime attacks are in solidarity with the Palestinians against Israeli aggression on Gaza and continuous Western complicity, even in the near future. These risks include:

- Empowering Somali pirates to launch attacks using asymmetric warfare weapons creates constant tension in navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Pirate groups demand ransom from shipping companies to avoid targeting their vessels crossing the Suez Canal. While the shipping industry resorts to private security companies to safeguard their ships and international forces deploy intensive naval patrols to secure shipping lanes, the effectiveness of these measures becomes futile against maritime ballistic missile attacks, drones, and suicide boats. It increases the cost of countering Somali piracy, where intercepting a Houthi drone, for example, costs two million dollars, whereas the drone itself costs less than \$2,000.

Somali pirate attacks on cargo ships using drones, suicide boats, and sticky mines enable the Houthis to deny their involvement in future attacks. However, at the same time, it makes the southern Red Sea a tool in the hands of the armed group to pressure the international community and their regional allies to make further political concessions to the Houthis and Iran.

This represents a new phase in maritime piracy in East Africa, supported by an entity with abundant resources of information, technology, and adequate funding. The shift from personal interest to political interest in piracy could potentially lead to changes in the governments and territories of countries in East Africa, where regional competition is intensifying. Instead of solely demanding ransom, pirates may now present political demands. This gives Iran an advantage over its Gulf rivals in exerting dominance over East Africa.

Iran tends to distance itself from piracy and targeting shipping vessels in the waters near the Strait of Hormuz, the Arabian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman, which has occurred in previous years. On the other hand, the Houthis see piracy as an opportunity to deny responsibility and gain concessions in international policies towards the group, especially with the United States' return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the nuclear agreement) appearing more difficult in the coming years in the presence of a Republican leadership in the White House.

The international presence in the waters of the Arabian Gulf creates tensions for Iran. As ongoing and urgent maritime threats occur far from their Gulf waters pushes those forces towards the Gulf of Aden and the southern Red Sea, away from the Islamic Republic's waters, reducing their concerns of an immediate war on their borders.

- While the Houthis' leaders may be confident in their ability to control the Somali pirates in the future, not to target Yemen's economy- once the Houthi group control the whole country- there is no guarantee of this. Yemeni ships have been the primary victims of Somali piracy since the early 2000s.

Conclusion-:

In summary, the situation in the southern Red Sea has the potential to be a turning point in the fragile maritime security environment of the region. The Houthis, Iran, and their relationship with the resurgence of pirates will be the main focus. While the world observes this area to protect freedom of navigation in the high seas, there will come a time when the Houthis - and perhaps Iran- will temporarily cease their maritime attacks. However, this does not signify the end of tension in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Instead, it marks the beginning of a new phase of politically motivated maritime piracy, which will not only impact trade in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait but also influence regional competition and internal conflicts in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. This could potentially change what we know about history of piracy worldwide.



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