

DOSSIER



MACHIAVELLI
CENTRO STUDI POLITICI STRATEGICI

Suadere atque agere

n. 50 - July 2024

SCATTERED APPROACH IN THE RED SEA CONTRIBUTES TO INSTABILITY

Irina Tsukerman

torque agere

MachiavelliDossier

n. 50 - 5 July 2024

Scattered Approach in the Red Sea Contributes to Instability

by Irina Tsukerman

Cover photo: storm clouds are seen on the southwestern coast of Yemen as the International Space Station was about to fly 254 miles over the Bab al-Mandab Strait in between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea - NASA, public domain, photo id: ISS059-E-078914

© 2024 Machiavelli Center For Political And Strategic Studies
Via Giambologna 7 - 50132
Florence (Italy)

ISSN 2612-047X

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Although the Iran-Israel crash so far was an isolated incident, it fundamentally changed the expectations for the region, elevating the risk.
- In light of this barrier being crossed, it is more important than ever to find a common solution to securitize the waters in the Middle East.
- The current security problems are costly to both the Western allies present in the region and to the local countries impacted by the Houthi strikes and Iran's hijacking of vessels.
- Several major obstacles stand in the way of an effective strategy: lack of coordination between several sets of security operations, the unwillingness to confront Iran as the source of the problem, the expansion of the coalition between Russia-China-Iran and regional proxies amidst Great Power.
- Competition, and the increasing dissonance between the US and its Middle Eastern allies, such as Saudi Arabia.
- There are currently four separate responses exploited by Houthis and Iran due to inherent communications problems and divergent political agendas: US-UK strikes, the US-led and largely symbolic defensive coalition, the EU defensive coalition, and India acting as a helpful but separate actor.
- The security problems are compounded by the involvement of third parties such as Somali pirates.
- Unless the countries involved in securing the Red Sea and Indian Ocean develop a common approach, the situation is likely to continue as is, or get worse, disrupting international trade, causing significant financial loss, and benefiting nefarious actors and anti-Western authoritarian regime. ■



THE AUTHOR

Human rights and national security lawyer based in New York and a Fellow at the Arabian Peninsula Institute. Member of the North American Society for Intelligence History. Fellow at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Member of the New York City Bar Association's Middle East and North African Affairs Committee. President of Scarab Rising, Inc. and editor-in-chief of *The Washington Outsider*. ■

Introduction

Iran's attack aimed at Israel may change the entire security framework in the region. The waves of drones and cruise missiles, coordinated with Iraq-based militias and the Yemen-based Houthis, have resulted in major disruptions to the airspace, following Iran's hijacking of an Israeli ship passing through the Strait of Hormuz, amid seeming inaction by the US-led Prosperity Guardian participants.

This development is a major escalation, representing the first time Iran has directly attacked Israel, but also underscores the encirclement of Israel by various Iran-linked entities and the close coordination between Iran and its proxies¹. This development puts an end to the possibility of containing the regional conflict and, unless Israel and the US work closely to reimpose deterrence, will likely lead to much more significant shipping disruptions – in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea. These developments follow months of a maritime war of attrition during the course of which various allies struggled to reconcile their maritime security strategies as Houthi and Iranian attacks widened in scope, scale, and intensity.

The Houthis, a colloquial name for the Iran-backed political faction known as “Ansar Allah”, have launched a wave of missile and drone attacks on various international vessels in the Red Sea on more than 60 occasions since October 2023. Between then and April 2024,

The Houthis, the Iran-backed Yemenite faction known as “Ansar Allah”, have launched waves of missiles and drones on various vessels in the Red Sea on more than 60 occasions since October 2023

the Houthis engaged in a rapidly escalating and broadening campaign of attacks, which have resulted in fatalities and in a sunken British ship. The Houthis claimed that they were only targeting Israeli, US, and UK ships as a form of pressure to get Israel to withdraw from Gaza after the October 7 “Al Aqsa Flood” Operation, which resulted in over 1.200 mostly civilian Israeli fatalities, and precipitated the latest Israel-Hamas war.

However, the Houthis have indiscriminately attacked the ships of many nations and continued attacks even after Israeli shipping bypassed the Houthis via the Cape of Good Hope. The Houthis have also launched multiple attacks aimed at Israel proper, and on at least one occasion managed to bypass Israeli missile defense capabilities to strike near Eilat. The result of these

However, the Houthis have indiscriminately attacked the ships of many nations and continued attacks even after Israeli shipping bypassed the Houthis via the Cape of Good Hope. The Houthis have also launched multiple attacks aimed at Israel proper, and on at least one occasion managed to bypass Israeli missile defense capabilities to strike near Eilat. The result of these

¹ - Irina Tsukerman, “Iran's Encirclement of Israel is A Lot More Than Hezbollah and Hamas,” *Le Courrier du Maghreb et de l'Orient/The Maghreb and Orient Courier*, April 2023. Available from: <https://lecourrierdumaghrebetdelorient.info/headline/irans-encirclement-of-israel-is-a-lot-more-than-hezbollah-and-hamas/>; Irina Tsukerman, “Iran's Grand Strategy to Destroy Israel Is Proceeding Apace,” The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 11 December 2023. Available from: <https://jcpa.org/article/irans-grand-strategy-to-destroy-israel-is-proceeding-apace/>

operations is mayhem, a scramble for defensive maneuvers and alternate routes, and significant damage to shipping², including the 45% reduction of Suez Canal traffic³. The international response has been at first slow, then fast, furious, disunited, and largely ineffective. The Houthis continue their campaign, escalating in aggression, scale, and scope, as well as expanding their horizons. Iran continues to provide invaluable assistance through surveillance and contraband. New players, including Somali pirates, have jumped into the fray. There is no sign that the end of the aggression is near; moreover, with Israel indicating that the operations in Gaza could last through the rest of the year, in all likelihood the US and UK are facing a long war with the regional militia⁴, which the US finally partially redesignated as Specially Designated Global Terrorists⁵, after removing Houthis from the Foreign Terrorist Organization list in 2021. Israel has also belatedly joined in⁶ designating Houthis as terrorists in early April 2024. The Houthis are winning the war, both in terms of their own clout and on Iran's behalf by expanding their reach and dividing the international efforts to protect freedom of navigation in a strategic choke-point. These divisions are apparent in four distinct security approaches, as well as proliferating challenges by state and non-state actors, leaving each group of allies with limited options and faulty strategies.

Four Separate Security Strategies

The first is a joint US-UK offensive effort; the second is a US-led international defensive coalition, "Operation Prosperity Guardian"; the third is a separate EU task force "Naval Force Aspides"; and the fourth is an independent effort by India. China and Russia have deployed warships to the Red Sea, claiming to contribute to the common defense of a vital global shipping lane, but have actually reached an understanding⁷ with the Houthis, pledging political and other support in exchange for protection from targeted attacks. Despite an accidental Houthi attack on a Chinese vessel, China and Russia are part of the Iran problem, not the solution.

2 - Stephen Kalin and Saleh al-Batati, "Houthi Attacks Disrupt Shipping, Draw U.S. Into Direct Conflict," *Wall Street Journal*, 28 January 2024. Available from: <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/houthi-attacks-disrupt-shipping-draw-u-s-into-direct-conflict-b467db73>

3 - Philip Blenkinsop, "Freight through Suez Canal down 45% since Houthi attacks - UNCTAD," Reuters, 26 January 2024. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/freight-through-suez-canal-down-45-since-houthi-attacks-unctad-2024-01-26/>

4 - Sam Bagher and Mohammed Hatem, "Iran-Backed Houthis Prepare for Long Red Sea Battle With US," *Bloomberg*, 22 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-22/iran-backed-houthis-boost-military-power-to-battle-us-in-red-sea>

5 - Jennifer Hansler, "Biden administration re-designates Houthis as Specially Designated Global Terrorists," *CNN*, 17 January 2024. Available from: <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/politics/biden-administration-houthis-global-terrorist-entity/index.html>

6 - Ohad Merlin, "Israel finally designates Yemen's Houthis as terror organization," *Jerusalem Post*, 3 April 2024. Available from: <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/israel-designates-houthis-as-terror-organization-794997>

7 - Sam Bagher and Mohammed Hatem, "Iran-Backed Houthis Prepare for Long Red Sea Battle With US," *Bloomberg*, 22 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-22/iran-backed-houthis-boost-military-power-to-battle-us-in-red-sea>

US-UK offensive operations

In January 2024, in response to the escalating attacks, the US and UK launched a series of airstrikes targeting hundreds of Houthi sites. In the ensuing months, the two countries led multiple rounds of airstrikes to degrade Houthi military infrastructure and to send a message to Iran. The early rounds of airstrikes were said to have contributed to the slowdown of arms shipments⁸ from Iran to Yemen and destroyed approximately 93% of selected targets, which included missiles and missile launch sites, radars, and other equipment. However, since these early successes, information about the impact of these airstrikes has been limited.

The airstrikes have largely been retaliatory in nature; so far officials have not articulated a clear objective in wiping out Houthi capabilities. The overwhelming majority of activity consists of taking down drones and missiles aimed at US and UK warships. Since the initial rounds, there has been no public breakdown of additional targets inside Yemen or their success rates. One major offensive operation worth noting consisted of a cyber attack against an Iranian surveillance ship⁹, deemed to be providing intelligence support to the Houthis in identifying targets. The strike temporarily debilitated the ship's capabilities; however, Houthi targeting of both commercial shipping and warships continued with only short breaks. Overall, this approach has been criticized as predictable and weak. Two specific criticisms emerged: that attacking Houthis will not put an end¹⁰ to Iran's geopolitical ambitions or regional aggression, and that to the extent the US and UK wish to send a deterrence message, they should select better targets¹¹.

The first critique indicates that the US and UK are prone to treating regional militias and proxies as independent actors with their own agency and potential role to play. Houthis, because they have control of the North of Yemen where most of the population resides, are often treated as a quasi-governmental actor. In the past year, the US and Saudi Arabia have pushed for a diplomatic process that would formally include the Houthis in the internationally recognized Yemeni government. The Houthi demands and radical ideology have proved to be an insurmountable obstacle thus far; moreover, Houthi attacks are not limited to the post-October 7 maritime activity. Houthis are continuing their forceful march towards the South as well as brutal attacks with indiscriminate shelling of Yemeni civilians. A recent attack in

⁸ - Alex Wickham and Jennifer Jacobs, "US and UK Airstrikes Slow Iran From Supplying Weapons to Houthis, Officials Say," *Bloomberg*, 16 January 2024. Available from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-16/us-uk-airstrikes-slow-iran-weapon-supplies-to-houthis-officials-say>

⁹ - Courtney Kube and Carol E. Lee, "U.S. conducted cyberattack on suspected Iranian spy ship," *NBC News*, 15 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/us-conducted-cyberattack-suspected-iranian-spy-ship-rcna138638>

¹⁰ - Jason M. Brodsky, "Striking the Houthis won't stop Iran," *The Spectator*, 12 January 2024. Available from: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-us-strike-on-the-houthis-wont-deter-iran-or-its-proxies/>

¹¹ - Interview with Dr. Salvatore Mercogliano, "The Washington Outsider Report," Ep. 127, *The Coalition Radio*, Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glDsQqA4yWM>

retaliation for an ambush against Houthi fighters blew up¹² a residential house killing a family of nine, including seven children.

Understandably, the Houthi willingness to target civilians complicates their effort to gain international legitimacy. Yet, the US and UK have separated these domestic attacks from the shipping disruptions and discounted that Houthi activity at home and abroad is consistent with Houthi ideology and part of the same strategy advanced to favor Iran's goals. The Allies are in a conundrum: they wish to pursue a successful military strategy, yet strategically, their effort to deter Houthis and their puppet master Iran from further aggression is undercut by the diplomatic considerations of making a Yemen "mega-deal" that would construct a government inclusive of the Houthis. This is a repetition of the failed approach of the Saudi-led Arab Coalition, which could have achieved victory early in the war before the Houthis made significant advances. As Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)'s Defense Ministry pursued an assertive track to force the Houthis from the strategic port of Hodeidah, one of the leading conduits of both international humanitarian aid and Iran's contraband into Yemen, KSA's Foreign Ministry pursued backchannel diplomacy with the Houthis in the hopes of coming to a non-violent understanding, and eventually went along with a UN-brokered truce (the Stockholm Agreement), which the Houthis violated almost immediately by taking control of Hodeidah and have exploited to import more and more sophisticated weapons ever since. Then and now leading diplomats treated the Houthis as independent agents, as persuadable and rational stakeholders, and as parties who had largely the same goals at that phase of the conflict as what they had articulated in the first weeks of the uprising – to be included and granted equal rights.

The Allies are in a conundrum: they wish to pursue a successful military strategy but they are braked by the diplomatic considerations of making a Yemen "mega-deal" that would include Houthis in a new government

However, the Houthis are demonstrably none of the three, and have repeatedly rejected the overtures and compromises to be included, agreeing only to complete domination of Yemen. It is essential to understand the Houthi position on domestic matters to understand their position on the Red Sea attacks. The Allies have ignored, to their peril, the growing level of Houthi subservience and fealty to Iran over time, this evolution being reflected in their ideology, level of preparedness, and political actions that, no matter the stated objective, inevitably reflect Iran's will and further greater regional ambitions. For that reason, allowing the failing diplomatic efforts to define the military strategy benefits Iran. Believing that the Houthis have independent decision-making without Iran's political and military training, funding,

¹² - Samy Magdy, "Houthis in Yemen blow up a resident's house, killing at least 9 from the same family, residents say," Associated Press, 19 March 2024. Available from: <https://apnews.com/article/yemen-houthis-crackdown-war-15cf9afdbf8935a171a591c18a253d4d>

support, advice, and oversight is erroneous. The level of integration of Iran's political players and Houthi institutions is undeniable and profound, with the presence of (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) IRGC and Hizbullah advisers on the ground, a past appointment of an Iranian ambassador to Sana'a, and frequent visits by Houthi leaders to Tehran and Doha for high level meetings with Iranian officials. Where in the past the Houthis had a semblance of independence, by now they are a part of Iran's integrated network of regional proxies, increasingly interchangeable and complementary in many regards.

The second issue is that regardless of whether the US and UK focus on the Houthis, on Iran, or on both, if they choose targets that are easily replaceable and hold no clear value to either actor, deterrence diminishes. Adapting quickly to the targeting of their radars, drones, and missile launch sites, the Houthis learned to hide their equipment deeper inside the country where they are harder to identify and to reach. Iran's sharing of SIGINT has diminished the need for domestic systems.

The delivery of Iranian weapons to Yemen continues apace. The Pentagon is quiet¹³ when asked about the success rate of disrupting the flow of arms, by sea and by land, through borders with Oman¹⁴ and Lebanon. A successful disruption would require nothing short of liquidating some of the Houthi leadership and senior IRGC commanders, and perhaps would include strong attacks on Iranian missile production factories, pipelines, as well as command and control centers. The liquidation of Qassem Soleimani was a wake-up call for Iran; although Tehran retaliated

The Pentagon is quiet, although cutting off the flow of weapons would require nothing more than the liquidation of part of the Houthi leadership and attacks on Iranian missile factories, pipelines and C&C centers

with unsuccessful efforts to assassinate former US officials on US soil, Soleimani's death was effective in curtailing the contemporaneous bout of vessel hijackings and Houthi attacks at the time. A similar strategy is necessary to restore freedom of

navigation; attacking symbolic targets that can be rebuilt and replaced is hardly seen as a setback by the determined Houthi fighters and their Iranian masters, especially as the US considers removing¹⁵ the Houthis from the blacklist if they agree to stop the attacks.

¹³ - Hannah Sarisohn, "US remains quiet on Iran's efforts to resupply Houthis military capabilities after strikes," *The Jerusalem Post*, 23 January 2024. Available from: <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-783418>

¹⁴ - Irina Tsukerman, "Report: Iranian military bases in Oman Threaten Regional Security," *Modern Diplomacy*, 1 November 2019. Available from: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2019/11/01/report-iranian-military-bases-in-oman-threaten-regional-security/>

¹⁵ - Sam Dagher, "US May Revoke Houthi Terrorist Label If They Stop Red Sea Ship Attacks," *Bloomberg*, 3 April 2014. Available from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-03/us-may-revoke-houthi-terrorist-label-if-they-stop-red-sea-ship-attacks>

US-led defensive alliance

The US introduced Operation Prosperity Guardian in December 2023 in response to Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. Over 20 nations ultimately joined this effort at “highway patrol”¹⁶ in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The operation is similar to Operation Sentinel¹⁷ from a few years ago, when a multinational naval taskforce accompanied commercial vessels to prevent hijackings by Iran. Prosperity Guardian has met with a series of challenges. First, despite a vast array of commitments, the participation of many members is more symbolic than substantive. While the navies have been able to intercept many of the missiles and drones launched by the Houthis, they have not been able to prevent the sinking of a British ship, or the damage done to several other vessels.

Moreover, some of the navies face upcoming hurdles, such as military budget limitations and personnel shortages, which means they cannot participate in the operation indefinitely. Despite this effort, Maersk decided to pause its Red Sea transit¹⁸ indefinitely, putting under further strain the idea of guaranteeing freedom of navigation and the free flow of goods by the Alliance. Other internal problems¹⁹ include limited deterrence, insufficient vessels, and the War Risk inflation of shipping rates. The Alliance may mitigate but is incapable of ending the threat. However, the lack of coordination with other defensive taskforces operating in the area brings another host of problems, as far as the Houthis and Iran are concerned.

EU defensive alliance

Two months after the US announced Operation Prosperity Guardian, the EU finalized²⁰ the formation of its own similar effort, after facing criticism for refusing to join the US-led effort. No member of the EU is participating in offensive operations against the Houthis. The headquarters of the EU effort is in Greece, which sought to play a key role while also pushing for the growth of its domestic defense industry. Greece deployed a frigate into the area while assuming the command of the operation, as Italy took charge of the naval force.

¹⁶ - Jim Garamone, “Ryder Gives More Detail on How Operation Prosperity Guardian Will Work,” *DOD News*, 21 December 2023. Available from: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3624836/ryder-gives-more-detail-on-how-operation-prosperity-guardian-will-work/>

¹⁷ - “U.S. Central Command Statement on Operation Sentinel,” 19 July 2019. Available from: <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/1911282/us-central-command-statement-on-operation-sentinel/>

¹⁸ - Lori Ann LaRocco, “Maersk’s Red Sea shipping pause highlights challenges for U.S.-led efforts to protect trade,” *CNBC*, 2 January 2024. Available from: <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/02/maersk-red-sea-pause-shows-operation-prosperity-guardian-limits.html>

¹⁹ - Sal Mercogliano, “Operation Prosperity Guardian: Whose Prosperity is Being Guarded?,” *gCaptain*, 27 December 2023. Available from: <https://gcaptain.com/operation-prosperity-guardian-opinion/>

²⁰ - EU foreign ministers approve Red Sea naval mission,” *DW*, 19 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-foreign-ministers-approve-red-sea-naval-mission/a-68296219>

Although France joined the operations earlier than the rest of the EU and was patrolling the area jointly with the Operation Prosperity Guardian, it specifically excluded itself from that contingency and at that stage focused entirely on defense of its own vessels, which led to consternation among the Prosperity Guardian participants. Later, France formally joined the EU-NAVFOR ASPIDES mission, helping take down drones and escorting ships. The EU operation remains independent of Prosperity Guardian. One of the issues raised by this development is that some of the EU countries do not wish to be associated with the parallel US-UK offensive effort and believe that joining the US taskforce would increase the danger to them.

Disunity between the US, UK, and the European Union undermines the possibility of success. Despite numerous attacks on European ships, the EU has not added the Houthis to its own terrorist blacklist. Iran and the Houthi are exploiting the situation, for instance, making use of the limited coordination between the taskforces. While Houthi targeting may appear random and opportunistic, there may be a more sinister strategy at work, specifically trying to peel off weaker Alliance members and forcing stronger countries to spend resources on “freeloaders”.

India

India’s role in navigating these stormy waters is a new phenomenon, as the country is focusing on developing its own defense and balances its independent foreign policy between commitments to the US-led Quad in the Indo-Pacific on the one hand, and occasional maritime exercise that include Russia, Iran, and even China, on the other. A ship off India’s coast was

A ship off India’s coast was hit by an Iranian drone, which contributed to India’s move to send over a dozen warships into the Red Sea, in an unprecedented projection of power

hit by an Iranian drone²¹, which contributed to India’s move to send over a dozen warships²² into the Red Sea, in an unprecedented projection of power. Despite signaling deterrence against Iran-backed attacks, India has focused most of its efforts on countering Somali pirates. India engaged in several successful operations

to recover its own ships as well as those of other countries, including a civilian Iranian vessel. India was even able to arrest 35 pirates²³. India is proving a capable ally – but also playing a supportive role by focusing on a collateral threat.

21 - “Drone fired from Iran strikes tanker off India’s coast, Pentagon says,” *CBS News*, 23 December 2023. Available from: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pentagon-says-drone-fired-from-iran-strikes-tanker-off-india-coast/>

22 - Krishn Kaushik, “India deploys unprecedented naval might near Red Sea to rein in piracy,” *Reuters*, 31 January 2024. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/india-deploys-unprecedented-naval-might-near-red-sea-rein-piracy-2024-01-31/>

23 - “Indian Navy brings 35 captured Somali pirates for trial in India,” *Times of India*, 23 March 2024. Available from: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indian-navy-brings-35-captured-somali-pirates-for-trial-in-india/articleshow/108722518.cms>

India has so far stayed out of the direct fray with the Houthis and Iran, nor has it joined any of the coordinated actions by other countries. This policy presents a dilemma for the US, UK, and EU. How can they engage India's increasingly formidable forces and add to the deterrence value against the brazen attacks in the Red Sea? So far, the failure to create a united front has undercut the value of additional participants. To the Houthis and Iran, the US and UK are isolated in their willingness to engage in offensive operations, and that even those countries playing a role on the defensive front do not have the level of mutual trust among themselves to develop a united strategy that could end the attacks altogether.

Great Power Competition Behind the Houthi Attacks

Compounding the disunity problem is the perception of the Houthis as an autonomous and tactical problem.

China/Russia/Iran Coalition

China, Russia, and Iran have engaged in multiple joint naval exercises, which suggest a preparation for a potential confrontation against the US led coalition in some form. Moreover, China, upon threatening Japan with war over its support for Taiwan, indicated that Russia and North Korea would be co-belligerents. All three countries have now established a presence in the Red Sea, in addition to their own respective spheres of influence. Russia also attempts to dominate the Black Sea, while China's overtures in the South China Sea are increasingly aggressive. China sent four surveillance ships²⁴ to the Indian Ocean, in dangerous proximity to India's sovereign territory, which indicates espionage activity particularly regarding the underwater internet cables, and not just harmless scientific inquiry.

- **Regional Strategies**

Iran, Russia, and China's presence in the overcrowded strategic location represents a clear and present danger to efforts to eliminate the Houthi threat. Even if unintentional, the theoretical and inadvertent possibility has dramatically increased.

- **Coordination**

The US leaned on China to get the Houthis and Iran to put an end²⁵ to the attacks against all

²⁴ - Bidisha Saha, "4 Chinese vessels in Indian Ocean region. Is Colombo set to host spy ships again?," *India Today*, 23 March 2024. Available from: <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/four-chinese-vessels-in-ior-is-colombo-prepared-to-host-spy-ship-again-2518393-2024-03-23>

²⁵ - "US asks China to urge Iran to curb Red Sea attacks by Houthis," Reuters, 24 January 2024. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-urges-china-help-curb-red-sea-attacks-by-iran-backed-houthis-ft-2024-01-24/>

ships passing through the area, but China's response was to send its own ships into the area to improve coordination with the Houthis, Iran, and Russia. China may be waiting for an escalation in the Red Sea (and perhaps contributing to it underhandedly) in hopes of achieving maximum Western distraction before attacking Taiwan. This could entail the sinking of a US warship or another calamitous escalation that will force a more assertive response. Another possibility is a drone swarm and/or damaging direct attack into Israel that could prod the latter to take offensive action.

The worst case scenario could see a simultaneous escalation on three fronts²⁶ – in the Black Sea, where NATO powers have been reluctant to confront Russia's Black Sea Fleet, in the South China Sea, and in the Red Sea. Experts such as Charles P. Ridgway Jr. believe that the Western coalition(s) may not be prepared. There is no evidence this three-way war was war-gamed, a prevention strategy is in practice, or a contingency plan ready. Even if this threat is theoretical, China, Russia, and Iran are gaining from the economic disruptions and political mayhem.

Arab Gulf Powers Present an Additional Obstacle

One of the obstacles to a more devastating response to Houthis is Saudi Arabia's reported unwillingness not only to assist in the matter, but outright blocking the US²⁷ from strikes in its vicinity. KSA embarked on largely fruitless peace negotiations with the Houthis two years ago; nevertheless, one tangible outcome is the temporary cessation of attacks on Saudi territory. Houthis have issued direct threats²⁸ to KSA about renewing attacks if Riyadh cooperates with the US; the US has so far not reassured Riyadh about potential for defense from the Houthis or Iran since Trump's failure to respond to the attack on ARAMCO. The UAE urged the US to take action, but after mostly withdrawing from Yemen and normalizing with Iran, is reluctant to return to the battlefield.

Bahrain has formally joined the US-defensive coalition, but has suffered repeated attacks by Houthis and Al Shabaab in Somalia. Moreover, after normalizing with Iran, Saudi Arabia and UAE have tried to balance their relations between the two countries. In defense matters, too, there has been a gravitation towards China, while Russia appears to gain ground with regards to energy-related coordination among OPEC countries. As for Qatar, it has reportedly paid for Chinese drones and was removed from the Arab Coalition in Yemen after allegedly leaking intelligence information which led to a deadly Houthi attack on a Coalition base in 2016.

26 - Interview with Charles P. Ridgway, Jr., "The Washington Outsider Report," Ep. 136, *The Coalition Radio*, 7 April 2024. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQN4SE5Ze5o>

27 - "Saudi Arabia prevented US using its territories strike Houthis, official says," *MEMO/Middle East Monitor*, 22 March 2024. Available from: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240322-saudi-arabia-prevented-us-using-its-territories-strike-houthis-official-says/>

28 - "'Next Target Saudi If...': Houthis Warn MBS Against Allowing U.S. Jets On Kingdom's Soil," *Hindustan Times*, 29 March 2024. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKXvKNyIc6w>

Israel-Hamas War is a Pretext

Hamas has rejected a negotiated ceasefire even after suffering significant losses, to say nothing of infrastructure destruction and humanitarian damage in Gaza. The Houthi claim that Israel's withdrawal from Gaza will end Red Sea hostilities is a pretext for trying to push the US out of the region given that most of the ships attacked are not Israeli. The idea here is to put the brunt of the blame for the economic crisis resulting from shipping disruptions on Israel and to create political momentum for ending arms sales to Israel, and to force a unilateral withdrawal that would humiliate both Israel and its Western allies and salvage the remnants of Hamas forces to fight another day.

Houthi's plan is to create an economic crisis by shipping disruptions, blame Israel for it and to create political momentum to force a withdrawal that would humiliate both Israel and its Western allies

So far, this angle has been almost forgotten as pressure on Israel mounts over humanitarian incidents and the overall duration of the fight. It may be that the Houthis slowed down their attacks not necessarily due to the significant damage as the US claims, but because the political pressure on Israel could change the situation and the US is already demonstrating a lack of strategy and will in confronting the Houthis and Iran.

The Conflict is Widening

Meanwhile, the Houthis have succeeded in escalating and widening the conflict, which once again raises questions about the success of US strategy in degrading the Houthi military infrastructure. Several factors contributed to a much more complex maritime security situation by April 2024 than in the early stages.

- **Somali Pirates**

Opportunists and fellow travelers are adding to the troubled waters. Somali pirates have expanded their operations from the attacks on passing commercial ships in the proximity of the Somali shores into the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. They have grown more brazen and better equipped, taking advantage of the focus on the Houthi threat, distraction and lack of coordination between the allied by divided, uncoordinated forces.

- **Attacks in the Indian Ocean**

The scope of the conflict has reached into the Indian Ocean, indicating that Iran is willing to participate directly in the conflict. Since November 2023, there have been 133 reported incidents,

including 14 vessels struck by missiles or drones and 18 vessels hijacked by Somali pirates²⁹. The Houthis have also claimed to have attacked a ship in the Indian Ocean, one of multiple such efforts, following an articulated intention³⁰ to expand operations. If the previous attacks were not coordinated between Iran, Houthis, and the Somali pirates, the future ones could be³¹. There was a joint Iran-Houthi attack³² on a Bulgarian ship. If evidence of such coordination emerges, both the Western coalitions and India will be faced with some tough political decisions.

- **Arabian Sea**

The Houthis briefly paused then resumed operations, sparking concerns about the additional expansion³³ of the conflict into the Arabian Sea. Although the Houthis have not yet been able to put an end to Israel's combat operations in Gaza, they have imposed high costs on supporters of Israel by reorienting shipping³⁴ cutting off access to the area to countries that are aligned with Israel, and forcing shipping costs to skyrocket. In the meantime, the area continues to be a conduit for contraband³⁵ from Iran. By continuing to treat the Houthis as an isolated threat, rather than a weaponized tool in a wider battle for power among several regional powers, the coalitions defending freedom of the navigation are bound to be ensnared deeper and deeper into escalating fights they cannot fully prevent or stop.

Solutions

First, these coalitions should formulate a comprehensive joint strategy and come to an agreement about basic security coordination and ideally agreement on sending a strong collective message of deterrence against Iran. Proper international pressure has successfully deterred Iran. Interdiction of weapons bound for the Houthis, more assertive targeting of Houthi leadership, ending counterproductive talks on rewarding Houthi aggression with integration into the

29 - Francois Vreÿ and Mark Blaine, "Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean Attacks Expose Africa's Maritime Vulnerability," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 9 April 2024. Available from: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/red-sea-indian-ocean-attacks-africa-maritime-vulnerability/>

30 - Sam Chambers, "Houthis claim to have attacked ship in the Indian Ocean," *Splash247*, 8 April 2024. Available from: <https://splash247.com/houthis-claim-to-have-attacked-ship-in-the-indian-ocean/>

31 - Max Lin, "Houthis could partner with Iran, Somali pirates on Indian Ocean attacks," *S&P Global*, 26 March 2024. Available from: <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/shipping/032624-houthis-could-partner-with-iran-somali-pirates-on-indian-ocean-attacks>

32 - "Iran-Houthi 'Joint Attack' On Bulgarian Ship In Red Sea Near Yemen | Watch What Happened," *Hindustan Times*, 15 December 2023. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQOWQA5eBU8>

33 - Charlotte Goldstone, "Houthis Back to Attacking Ships After Brief Pause," *gCaptain*, 8 April 2024. Available from: <https://gcaptain.com/houthis-back-to-attacking-ships-after-brief-pause/>

34 - Jim Krane, "Houthi Red Sea Attacks Have Global Economic Repercussions," Arab Center Washington DC, 5 April 2024. Available from: <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/houthi-red-sea-attacks-have-global-economic-repercussions/>

35 - "Press Release: United States Charges Four Mariners from Arabian Sea Vessel Transporting Suspected Iranian-Made Advanced Conventional Weapons," US Department of Justice - Office of Public Affairs, 22 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/united-states-charges-four-mariners-arabian-sea-vessel-transporting-suspected-iranian-made>

internationally recognized Yemen government, and greater disruption of Iranian operations would also be immensely helpful. Another step to consider is reactivation of the Quad given the new threats in the Indian Ocean. Likewise, the I2U2 economic cooperation framework could be helpful in addressing the economic costs of the disruption to the shipping industry and providing favorable solutions in the framework of public private partnerships. Finally, Europe, India, and Middle Eastern allies are all suffering from the disruption to the India-Europe-Middle East Corridor; the US could help negotiate and guarantee a security framework that would play to the interests of allies, and reinvigorate flailing and frail relationships.

Finally, after Iran's direct attack on Israel, it is no longer possible to separate the Houthis maritime aggression from Iran's grand strategy to encircle and ensnare Israel. This insight provides several opportunities. First, Israeli capabilities can help in reimposing deterrence. Second, Iran's threat to freedom of navigation in the air and in the sea may finally motivate impacted parties, including the EU and India, to join forces with the US-led alliance. Third, the disruption and threat are so great that reluctant Arab states may be forced to support allied efforts. Forth, Iran's actions belie a feeling of impunity whether from the apparent daylight between Israel and the US over Gaza, accommodating US foreign policy, Israel's focus on self-defense, and/or due to security assurances by Russia and China. There is even a possibility that Iran has clandestinely acquired nuclear capabilities of some kind. Regardless of the reason, Iran's unbridled act of aggression have now put to rest any equivocations about the possible containment of its efforts to push the US and others out of the region, and gives ample justification for military action to roll back the combination of state and non-state threats that may otherwise have an irreversibly destructive impact on international shipping and the oil and gas trade. ■

There is a possibility that Iran has acquired nuclear capabilities. Iran's act of aggression have now put to rest any equivocations about the possible containment of its efforts, giving ample justification for military action

The views expressed in this research belong to the author and are not necessarily shared by the Machiavelli Center, its affiliates, or employees.



MACHIAVELLI
CENTRO STUDI POLITICI STRATEGICI

Suadere atque agere

**The Machiavelli Center for Political and Strategic Studies
since 2017 has been working to promote policies
marked by traditional values
and aimed at building a prosperous and strong Italy.**

www.centromachiavelli.com