

## **The Houthi rebels in Yemen and the war in Gaza**

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The Pentagon said on October 19, 2023, that the USS Carney destroyer shot down three land-attack cruise missiles and several drones launched by the Iran backed Houthi rebels from Yemen heading north along the Red Sea, towards targets in Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The USS Carney an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, was patrolling in the northern Red Sea as part of a heavily reinforced US military presence ordered by President Joe Biden to maintain stability in the wake of war between Israel and the Hamas in the Gaza Strip. President Biden has warned Iran and its regional allies repeatedly and clearly not to get involved in Israel's war with Hamas.<sup>2</sup>

Pentagon spokesperson Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder told reporters: "This action was a demonstration of the integrated air and missile defense architecture that we have built in the Middle East, and that we are prepared to utilize whenever necessary to protect our partners and our interests in this important region."<sup>3</sup>

A senior official in the Israeli army told an Israeli radio channel that they have intelligence "confirming" that the missiles were launched by Houthis and headed towards Israel.<sup>4</sup> IDF spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said the Israeli Air Force is ready to repel attacks by Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen. Israel has some of the world's best air defenses, and is prepared for threats like these, he added.<sup>5</sup>

Following the War in Gaza, a number Iran's proxy militant groups across the region — from Hezbollah to the Houthis — have expressed support for the Hamas and threatened Israel.<sup>6</sup>

Iranian state television has warned about attacks on Israel from multiple fronts on its borders if the ongoing crackdown on terrorist group Hamas in the Gaza strip region by IDF continues. The TV claimed that Houthis in Yemen possessed missiles with a range of more than 1200 miles.<sup>7</sup>

The Houthi movement has fought Yemen's Saudi and Western-backed government in a civil war for almost a decade. On September 21, 2023, Yemen's Houthi movement staged a parade in the Yemeni capital Sanaa to commemorate the ninth anniversary of their takeover of the city. Among the capabilities on display were several previously unseen ballistic- and cruise-missile types of Iranian origin. With Iranian assistance, the Houthis have managed to build up an array of weapon systems precision-guided rockets, ballistic missiles, land-attack cruise missiles and anti-shipping capabilities in a remarkably short period of time.<sup>8</sup>

The interceptions came as military bases hosting US forces in Iraq and Syria endured a spate of drone attacks over the past two days. The US has around 2,500 troops in Iraq supporting and training the country's forces, and another 900 in Syria working with the Syrian Democratic Forces.<sup>9</sup>

A spokesman of US Navy said: "Our defensive response was one we would have taken for any similar threat in the region, we have the capability to defend our broader interests in the region and to deter regional escalation and broader expansion of the conflict that began with Hamas' attack on Israeli civilians."<sup>10</sup>

### **Iran's proxy war against Israel**

Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, warned on October 16, 2023 that a regional network of militias known in parts of the Middle East as the "axis of resistance" <sup>11</sup>would open "multiple fronts" against Israel if its attacks continued in Gaza. Mr. Amir Abdollahian spoke after

returning to Tehran from a tour of capitals aligned or close to Iran. He met the top political official of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, in Doha, Qatar; the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, in Beirut; and President Bashar al-Assad of Syria in Damascus. Mr. Amir Abdollahian said that Iran did not give orders to the leaders of the “resistance axis” and that they are autonomous in their decision making. Asked by the state television news anchor if Iran would enter the war, he said: “Anything is possible”.<sup>12</sup>

Iran, a key source of financial and military support for Hamas, praised the October 7 Hamas attack while denying any involvement in its planning or execution.<sup>13</sup>

Mohammad Bagheri, the chief of staff of Iran’s armed forces, also warned that the ongoing Israeli attacks against Gaza could lead to the involvement of other parties in the conflict.<sup>14</sup>

Israel and Hezbollah have been exchanging fire and engaging in limited attacks and counterattacks for the past week, and Israel’s northern border with Lebanon is being closely monitored as the first potential flashpoint where the war could spread.<sup>15</sup>

Iranian state television has warned about attacks on Israel from multiple fronts on its borders if the ongoing crackdown on terrorist group Hamas in the Gaza strip region by IDF continues. The three-and-a-half-minute TV broadcast was narrated by Iranian reporter Younis Shadlou. The television broadcast featured footage of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who said that if the war continued “nobody could stop the forces of the resistance.”<sup>16</sup>

The TV report highlighted how a vicious attack on Israel would unfold from multiple fronts. It highlighted that Houthis in Yemen from the south, Syrian and Iraqi militias in Syria from the east, and Hezbollah in Lebanon from the north would launch coordinated attack on Israel with missiles and drones. The coordinated attack would lead to a siege of Israel from every side.<sup>17</sup>

The report claimed that Houthis in Yemen possessed missiles with a range of more than 1200 miles. It also claimed that Hezbollah in Lebanon

had stock of advanced missiles which could target Israeli warships in the Mediterranean Sea as well as Israel's important city of Tel Aviv. In the report, Shadlou signed off by saying that the vicious attack might happen in the next few days if Khamenei's ultimatum to cease offensive by Israel in Gaza, isn't implemented.<sup>18</sup>

### **The US and the war in Gaza**

Following the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, President Biden has bolstered America's military presence in the Middle East to show the country's commitment to Israel and to serve as a guard against the Israel-Hamas war spilling over in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin deployed two US aircraft carrier strike groups and a rapid response Marine unit to the Eastern Mediterranean. The Pentagon also ordered 2,000 personnel on standby for potential deployment.

Despite the moves, US officials say there are no plans for American boots to be on the ground in Israel. There is, however, a group of US service members advising and helping with hostage recovery in Israel.<sup>20</sup>

President Biden, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and other US officials warned Iran, Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies against opening a second front on Israel as the latter prepared to launch an operation against Hamas militants in Gaza.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the deployment of US forces in Eastern Mediterranean would allow the United States "to respond more quickly" to the crisis, while the White House stressed it did not intend to put US combat forces on the ground.<sup>21</sup>

President Biden flew to Israel on October 18, 2023, in a dramatic show of US support to Israel. President Biden repeated the warning to Iran and its proxies in an address to the nation. "So, in this moment, we must be crystal clear. We stand with Israel. Let me say again to any country, any organization, anyone thinking of taking advantage of this situation, I have one word. Don't. Don't!"<sup>22</sup> President Biden also urged Congress to fund military backing for Israel and another embattled US ally — Ukraine.

## **The Houthi threats to Israel**

On October 7, 2023, the same day that operation Al-Aqsa Flood was launched by Hamas, Muhammad Ali Al Houthi, a member of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, delivered remarks during a march in Sana'a in support of the operation. In his opening remarks, Al-Houthi stated: "We say to all those heroic mujahideen who launched the very great operation of the free peoples: may Allah bless you and move you, your jihad, your victory, and in what you have achieved today in this heroic and honorable operation that rivals the sky in its glory, strength, elevation, morale, and in its men, who believe in Allah and trust in Allah." Al-Houthi further took aim at Israel, hailing operation Al-Aqsa Flood for exposing the state's "weakness." He said: "The Al-Aqsa Flood Operation testifies to the fragility of the enemy, to the weakness of its intelligence, to the weakness of its strength, and to the fact that it represents nothing," Al-Houthi proclaimed, continuing, "we say to that Jew who went to make a Palestinian woman kneel, today we saw your trained soldiers kneel."<sup>23</sup>

The leader of Yemen's Houthi movement which calls itself Ansar Allah, Abdel-Malek Al-Houthi, warned on October 10, 2023, that if the US intervenes on the side of Israel in its "war" against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the group will respond by firing drones and missiles, and other military options. He said the group was ready to coordinate intervention with other members of the so-called "Axis of Resistance" which encompasses Iranian-backed Shiite Muslim factions in Iraq and Lebanon's Hezbollah group.<sup>24</sup> "We warn America that its direct intervention in the aggression against the Palestinian people means turning it into a regional war."<sup>25</sup>

Referring to similar statements put out by other groups in the so-called 'Islamic Resistance,' or group's controlled, supported, or allied to Iran, al-Houthi noted that he is maintaining a "red-line" for this conflict. For instance, this line will be crossed "if the Americans intervene directly and

militarily, then we are ready to participate even with missiles and marches.”<sup>26</sup>

The Houthi leader also called on various international organizations, such as the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, to support the so-called “Islamic Resistance” against Israel, otherwise such organizations are pursuing a “weak position.” According to al-Houthi, a “weak position” is akin to “loyalty to the Zionist entity.”<sup>27</sup>

The Houthis in Yemen consider both US and Israel as enemies and the slogan of the Houthi movement is "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam." The leader of Yemen's Houthi rebels has repeatedly warned that his group will join wars of Hizballah and Palestinian resistance groups against Israel.

Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi's political council and a spokesman for the movement, declared on X: "I believe that now is the opportune moment for the axis of resistance, represented by Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq, to participate in the decisive battle against the occupying Zionist entity in support of our Palestinian brothers."<sup>28</sup>

The Houthi threat to strike Israel is not a novel development, as they have issued similar warnings in the past. In 2020, a Houthi official said that long-range missiles fired at Saudi Arabian oil facilities could also be used against Israel.<sup>29</sup>

In March 2018, Abdel Malek al-Houthi told the Lebanese newspaper Al Akhbar that "our announcement that we are prepared to send fighters in any Israeli war against Lebanon or Palestine, is based on our principles". He claimed that Israel is "a true enemy" for every Arab and Muslim country, and if Yemen had borders with Lebanon or Palestine, Houthis would participate in fighting with the Lebanese and Palestinians. "We will not be reluctant to send fighters in a new war. Many of Yemen's tribesmen are ambitious to fight against Israel, and they are looking for the day to participate along with the freemen of the Islamic nation against the Israeli enemy," he added.<sup>30</sup>

## Summary

On October 18, 2023, the Houthis fired cruise missiles and drones in a northerly direction—toward Israel—that the USS Carney, intercepted. The Houthi threat to strike Israel is not a novel development, as they have issued similar warnings in the past but If Israel was indeed the target, this would be the Houthis' first time conducting such an attack.

The interceptions came as military bases hosting US forces in Iraq and Syria endured a spate of drone attacks over the past two days and Hezbollah has exchanged deadly fire with Israeli forces for more than a week.

Iran's coordination with its regional proxies since Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7 strongly suggests that the proxies are acting as part of an Iranian-organized strategic plan. Iran has denied involvement in planning the attack, but the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised the slaughter in a televised address.

The Iranian state television broadcast featured footage of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who said that if the war continued "nobody could stop the forces of the resistance." The TV report highlighted how a vicious attack on Israel would unfold from multiple fronts. It highlighted that Houthis in Yemen from the south, Syrian and Iraqi militias in Syria from the east, and Hezbollah in Lebanon from the north would launch coordinated attack on Israel with missiles and drones.

Although Israel has not yet started the ground attack in the Gaza Strip, Iran's Axis of Resistance is now acting as if its red lines have been crossed. The Iranian proxies are operating simultaneously in several arenas: Hezbollah from the border of Lebanon, groups affiliated with Hezbollah in Syria on the border in the Golan Heights and the Houthis in Yemen by launching missiles and rockets towards Israel. At this stage all the activities are relatively limited in scope and the main front of the campaign with the IDF is in the Gaza Strip.

It seems that Iran at this stage is interested in discouraging Israel from carrying out its threat to bring down Hamas and demonstrating to the US that Iran is capable of harming American interests in the Middle East if it supports Israel.

*The determination that Israel will demonstrate in the war in the Gaza Strip and its success in destroying Hamas infrastructure and the American support for Israel and the level of threat it will pose to Iran and its proxies will determine whether Iran will lead to escalation and a regional war or whether it will allow the war to be limited to Gaza Strip while showing solidarity with Hamas in the other arenas without degenerating into a regional war.*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> US Navy intercepts 3 missiles fired from Yemen 'potentially' at Israel: Pentagon, Arab news, October 20, 2023.  
<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2394376/middle-east>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> US Navy warship shoots down cruise missiles, drones 'potentially' targeting Israel, aa. com. October 20, 2023.  
<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/us-navy-warship-shoots-down-cruise-missiles-drones-potentially-targeting-israel/3026576>

<sup>4</sup> US Navy intercepts 3 missiles fired from Yemen 'potentially' at Israel: Pentagon, The new Arab, October 19, 2023.  
<https://www.newarab.com/news/us-intercepts-yemen-missiles-potentially-aimed-israel>

<sup>5</sup> IDF says ready to repel Houthi attacks, is striking Gaza 'at rate not seen in decades', The Times of Israel, October 20, 2023.  
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-ready-to-repel-houthi-attacks-is-striking-gaza-at-rate-not-seen-in-decades/>



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<sup>6</sup> Rockets fired by Houthis in Yemen meant for Israel; 30 children among Gaza hostages; IDF says hits 800 Gaza targets, ynet, October 19, 2023. <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/syy59o6za>

<sup>7</sup> Iranian state TV visualises how ‘multiple front attack’ on Israel would happen, Hindustan Times, October 19, 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/iranian-state-tv-visualises-how-multiple-front-attack-on-israel-would-happen-101697718741437.html>

<sup>8</sup> Little and large missile surprises in Sanaa and Tehran, IISS, October 17, 2023. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2023/10/little-and-large-missile-surprises-in-sanaa-and-tehran/>

<sup>9</sup> US Navy intercepts cruise missiles fired from Yemen, The Telegraph, October 20, 2023. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/10/20/us-yemen-iran-attack-israel-hamas-gaza-war-houthis/>

<sup>10</sup> US Navy intercepts 3 missiles fired from Yemen ‘potentially’ at Israel: Pentagon, Arab news, October 20, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2394376/middle-east>

<sup>11</sup> Iran commonly uses terms like “resistance forces,” “resistance groups,” “resistance front,” and “resistance axis” to refer to a network of regional militant groups that it supports. This network includes organizations like the Palestinian militant group Hamas, Lebanon’s Hezbollah, as well as various militias in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthi militia in Yemen.

<sup>12</sup> Iran warns of ‘multiple fronts’ if Israel’s Gaza attacks continue, The New York times, October 16, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/16/world/middleeast/iran-gaza-israel-hamas.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Iran commander warns ‘other actors’ could join war if Israel continues Gaza attacks, Al Arabiya, October 19, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/topics/palestinian-israeli-conflict/2023/10/19/iran-commander-warns-other-actors-could-join-war-if-Israel-continues-Gaza-attacks>

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<sup>15</sup> Iran warns of 'multiple fronts' if Israel's Gaza attacks continue, The New York times, October 16, 2023.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/16/world/middleeast/iran-gaza-israel-hamas.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Iran commonly uses terms like "resistance forces," "resistance groups," "resistance front," and "resistance axis" to refer to a network of regional militant groups that it supports. This network includes organizations like the Palestinian militant group Hamas, Lebanon's Hezbollah, as well as various militias in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthi militia in Yemen.

<sup>17</sup> Iranian state TV visualises how 'multiple front attack' on Israel would happen, Hindustan Times, October 19, 2023.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/iranian-state-tv-visualises-how-multiple-front-attack-on-israel-would-happen-101697718741437.html>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> US Navy intercepts cruise missiles fired from Yemen, The Telegraph, October 20, 2023. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/10/20/us-yemen-iran-attack-israel-hamas-gaza-war-houthis/>

<sup>20</sup> US Navy shoots down Houthi drones, missiles potentially targeting Israel: Pentagon, Al Arabiya, October 20, 2023.

<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/19/US-Navy-warship-near-Yemen-intercepted-projectiles-US-official-tells-Reuters>

<sup>21</sup> US Navy intercepts 3 missiles fired from Yemen 'potentially' at Israel: Pentagon, Arab news, October 20, 2023.

<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2394376/middle-east>

<sup>22</sup> Iran's Proxies in Yemen, Iraq Threaten US Over Support for Israel, Iran international, October 19, 2023.

<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202310102133>

<sup>23</sup> Political leader of Ansar Allah Houthi Movement delivers remarks at rally in Sana'a, Yemen, in support of Hamas attack, addresses Israel: 'Today we saw your trained soldiers kneel', MEMRI, October 7, 2023.

<https://www.memri.org/reports/political-leader-ansar-allah-houthi-movement-delivers-remarks-rally-sanaa-yemen-support>

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<sup>24</sup> Iran's proxies in Yemen, Iraq threaten US over support for Israel, Iran international, October 190, 2023.

<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202310102133>

<sup>25</sup> Yemen: Houthis warn US not to intervene in Gaza, Middle East monitor, October 11, 2023. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231011-yemen-houthis-warn-us-not-to-intervene-in-gaza/>

<sup>26</sup> Joe Truzman, Leader of Yemen's Houthis states willingness to support 'Palestinian people', FDD, October 10, 2023.

<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/10/10/leader-of-yemens-houthis-states-willingness-to-support-palestinian-people/>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Israel-Palestine war draws threats from Yemen's Houthis of regional conflict, Middle East Eye, October 12, 2023.

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-yemen-houthis-threats-regional-conflict>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Houthi leader vows to fight with Hezbollah in future war with Israel, Middle East Eye, March 23, 2018.

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/houthi-leader-vows-fight-hezbollah-future-war-israel>