

Israel's "long distance" war against the Houthis in Yemen

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Houthi Movement leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi gave a speech on October 7, 2024, marking one year since the beginning of the war in the Gaza Strip, praising the Palestinian people's stance against "Israeli aggression" and the support of members of the "axis of resistance" for the Palestinian people. He stressed Yemen's willingness to continue supporting the Palestinian struggle and even escalate its operations until the "siege" of the Gaza Strip is lifted, and the "Israeli aggression" stops. Al-Houthi summarized the Houthis' actions in the past year and claimed that they had launched more than a thousand missiles and drones, attacked 193 vessels linked to Israel, the United States, and Britain, and intercepted 11 American MQ9 drones.¹

The Houthi movement in Yemen, which calls itself Ansar Allah, 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 Hezbollah and Palestinian resistance groups against Israel.

The Houthis have declared themselves part of the "axis of resistance" of Iran's allies and proxies and senior figures of the Houthi movement have been threatening that if Israel continued its actions against the Hamas in Gaza Strip, they would not hesitate to join the campaign alongside Hamas.

The Houthi war against 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." ²

The leader of Yemen's Houthi movement, 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.³ "We warn America that its direct intervention in the aggression against the Palestinian people means turning it into a regional war." ⁴

Referring to similar statements put out by other groups in the so-called 'Axis of Resistance,' or groups 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." ⁵

There are probably three main reasons for the Houthis' decision to attack Israel with missiles and drones and to act against Israel's maritime traffic in the Red Sea during Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza:

The Houthis are part of "axis of resistance" led by Iran and the Houthis profile raised as a leading anti-Israel and anti-Western resistance movement.

The Houthis are historically supporters of the Palestinians and the Houthis want to portray themselves as champions of the Palestinian cause.

The Houthis want to gain domestic legitimacy and support (in Yemen).

The Houthis may believe that launching missiles and drones against Israel is "cost effective", considering the benefits they might gain from the action. According to this concept there is no contradiction between the three factors mentioned above and all three together serve the strategic interests of the Houthis in the Yemeni domestic arena and in the regional and international arenas.

The Houthis in Yemen declared war on Israel while it was fighting in Gaza as a main effort and on the northern front against Hezbollah as a secondary effort. This reality became even more difficult starting in April 2024 when Iran directly attacked Israel using drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles.

The Houthis have two main advantages: a range of almost 2000 km from Israel to Yemen and Israel's priority in dealing with the main threats from Iran, Lebanon and Gaza, and a limited ability to allocate resources and attention to the Yemeni arena.

On October 19, 2023, Houthi military forces launched for first time, cruise missiles and drones at the city of Eilat in the Red Sea region of Israel. But the attack was foiled and the Pentagon said 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. ⁶

Abd al-Aziz bin Habtour, the prime minister of Yemen's Houthi government, officially claimed responsibility for launching the missiles and drones, stating they were aimed at Israel and claiming some had hit their targets. In addition, he threatened that if Israeli operations against the Gaza Strip continued Israeli vessels would be attacked in the Red Sea and off the coast of Yemen. ⁷

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. ⁸

Since the war began in Gaza, missiles and drones have been launched at Israel from Yemen and the Houthi movement claimed responsibility for

the attacks. The Houthis have also targeted military and commercial vessels in the Red Sea, which they assessed to have any ties to Israel. The Iran-backed group has been firing indiscriminately and hit several ships with no links to the US or Israel. ⁹

The Israeli defensive policy

Since October 2023 the Houthis have become a strategic challenge, but not an existential threat, to Israel. Israel engaged in multi front war against Iran and its proxies preferred to avoid an additional front with the Houthis. Israel claimed that the removal of the Houthi threat to the maritime traffic in Red Sea must be an international effort.

Until July 20, 2024, Israel had limited its engagement with the Houthis to intercepting the over 200 projectiles it said have been fired at Israeli territory from Yemen since October 2023. The Israeli policy had been to let the U.S.-led multinational coalition manage direct engagement with the Houthis.

Israel has a multi-layer air defense system to defend against missiles and drones launched from Yemen and the IDF is well-coordinated with the U.S. Central Command and Fifth Fleet, fighting the aggression from Yemen. The Israeli military also deployed Saar-class missile boats in the Red Sea on November 1, 2023, as reinforcements patrolling near Eilat port in the Red Sea.¹⁰

On October 19, 2023, the USS Carney destroyer shot down land-attack cruise missiles and several drones launched by the Houthi rebels towards targets in Israel. ¹¹It was the first time that US forces in the Red Sea defended Israel.

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." ¹²

The US response - operation "Prosperity Guardian"¹³

In response to Houthis' reckless assaults on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden the United States and the international community have taken action to counter these attacks. In December 2023, the United States launched operation "Prosperity Guardian", a coalition of

more than 20 nations committed to defending international shipping and deterring Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

In January 2024, together with 13 allies and partners, the U.S. issued an unequivocal warning that Houthi rebels would face consequences if their attacks did not cease. Additionally, the UN Security Council passed a resolution demanding the Houthis end attacks on merchant and commercial vessels.

Since January 2024, the U.S. had taken the lead to defend maritime shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. US and allied ships thwarted hundreds of missile and drone attacks against civilian and military ships in the region.

On January 11, 2024, the United States and Britain for the first time, carried out over a dozen strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen, in response to the group's attacks on ships in the Red Sea. The US Department of Defense said the first night of attacks on Yemen involved more than 100 munitions fired from US and UK "maritime and air platforms," that targeted more than 16 locations controlled by Houthi forces. On January 13, 2024, US forces conducted a second strike against a Houthi radar site in Yemen.¹⁴

The Netherlands, Australia, Canada and Bahrain provided logistical and intelligence support, while Germany, Denmark, New Zealand and South Korea signed a joint statement defending the attacks and warning of further action. But Italy, Spain and France chose not to sign or participate, fearing a wider escalation.¹⁵

Since January 2024 the US and UK forces conducted several airstrikes against Houthi targets but they failed to convince the Houthis to halt attacks against the maritime traffic in the region.

In parallel with the military operations, to disrupt the flow of funds to the Houthis for their terrorist activities and to limit their access to financial networks, the United States has designated them as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. This is a significant step to prevent financial support from reaching the Houthis and to ensure they are held accountable for their actions.

The airstrike of B 2 in Yemen as a regional message

U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) forces conducted on October 16, 2024, multiple, precision airstrikes on numerous Iran-backed Houthi weapons storage facilities within Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen that contained various advanced conventional weapons used to target U.S. and international military and civilian vessels navigating international waters throughout the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

These actions were taken to degrade the Houthi's capability to continue their reckless and unlawful attacks on international commercial shipping and on U.S., coalition, and merchant personnel and vessels in the Red Sea, Bab Al-Mandeb Strait, and the Gulf of Aden, and to degrade their ability to threaten regional partners.

CENTCOM forces targeted the Houthi's hardened underground facilities housing missiles, weapons components, and other munitions used to target military and civilian vessels throughout the region. U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy assets, including U.S. Air Force B-2 Spirit long-range stealth bombers, were part of the operation. The employment of the B-2 bomber demonstrated U.S. global strike capabilities to reach these targets, when necessary, anytime, anywhere.¹⁶

Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin said on October 17, 2024, that US Air Force B-2 bombers conducted precision strikes against five hardened underground weapons storage locations in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. “This was a unique demonstration of the United States’ ability to target facilities that our adversaries seek to keep out of reach, no matter how deeply buried underground, hardened, or fortified,” Austin said in a statement, highlighting the advanced precision capabilities of the US military.¹⁷

The Israeli offensive strategy

Until July 2024, the IDF had outsourced responses to the Houthis to the US, which was fighting the group over various maritime aggression issues. However, after the Houthis killed a civilian in Tel Aviv, Israel struck back for the first time.

Israel changed policy in response to the first time that the Houthis killed an Israeli civilian in the continuing conflict. Israel targeted Hodeidah, the Houthis’ main port to inflict significant economic damage to the Houthis.

The first airstrike against the Houthis in Yemen

On July 19, 2024, a drone attack was launched on Tel Aviv, killing one Israeli citizen and injuring several others. The attack marked the first time Tel Aviv has been struck by a drone. The attack was claimed by the Houthis, with spokesperson Yahya Sare'e said the operation was performed by a new drone capable of "bypassing the enemy's interception systems."¹⁸

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman Daniel Hagari said that the military suspects the drone was an Iranian-made Samad-3 model, launched from Yemen, which had been upgraded to extend its range. A second drone was intercepted outside of Israeli airspace to the east at the same time as the attack, he said, adding that Israel is now upgrading its air defenses and increasing aerial patrols of its borders.

In addition, Israel's army spokesman said the militant group has targeted Israeli civilians and civilian infrastructure about 200 times in the same period. Most of those launches were intercepted by US Central Command, the spokesman said, but Israel's air defenses have also intercepted Houthi drones and missiles inside and outside Israel's airspace.¹⁹

Israel's response came a day later, when Israeli air force hit the Yemeni port of Hodeidah. The attack, which marked the first time Israel has struck Yemen, killed at least six people and injured scores more, Yemeni officials said. The Houthi-run Al Masirah TV said the strikes targeted oil facilities in the port on Yemen's west coast.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the port was used by Iran to bring arms into Yemen. "The port we attacked is not an innocent port. It was used for military purposes; it was used as an entry point for deadly weapons supplied to the Houthis by Iran." Netanyahu also said the operation, which hit targets 1,800 km from Israel's borders, showed Israel was serious about responding to threats. "It makes it clear to our enemies that there is no place that the long arm of the State of Israel will not reach," Netanyahu said.²⁰

The second airstrike against the Houthis in Yemen

On September 29, 2024, the IDF struck Yemen's Hodeidah and Ras Issa ports. The IDF said the strikes were carried out in response to the Houthis recent ballistic missile attacks on Israel, including three ballistic missiles

on the Tel Aviv and central Israel areas in September 2024.²¹ The strikes targeted sites used by the Houthi regime for military purposes at Hodeidah and the nearby Ras Isa port in western Yemen. Targets included power plants and seaports used to import oil, which the Houthis used to transfer Iranian weapons to the region, in addition to military supplies and oil.²²

The IDF's impressive strike against the Houthis was the most powerful one against the terror group since the beginning of the war, even exceeding the massive strike on Hodeidah in July 2024. The Houthi Health Ministry said the attack resulted in the deaths of four fighters and the wounding of 29.

Summary

The Houthis in Yemen and their sponsors in Tehran pose two main challenges to Israel and the US :repeated attacks against targets in Israel using missiles and drones and attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Israel's air defense is dealing successfully with the threat of attacks by the Houthis on its territory and since July 2024, Israel is also exacting a heavy toll from the Houthis by attacking strategic targets in Yemen, but Israel can't solve the problem of navigation security in the Red Sea.

After a year of war, Israel destroyed the main military capabilities of Hamas and eliminated Sinwar and the movement's military leadership, as well as eliminated Nasrallah and severely damaged the military capabilities of the Hezbollah organization. These military achievements significantly damaged the "axis of resistance" that Iran has been building for decades.

The newly created situation is an opportunity to bring an end to the aggression of the Houthis and Iran in the Red Sea arena. More aggressive military pressure by the US-led coalition on the Houthis in Yemen may convince Iran to stop aggression in this arena for fear of losing the capabilities of another proxy organization (the Houthis) as happened to them with Hamas and Hezbollah.

A comprehensive military, political and economic campaign of the US-led coalition may lead to an end to the Houthi aggression in the Red Sea. Israel's successes in its war against Hamas and Hezbollah and successful pressure on Iran and the Houthis may bring about a change in the

geopolitical landscape of the Middle East while weakening the Iranian axis and strengthening the position of the US and its allies in the region.

Notes

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²⁰ Ibid.

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