



The Current and Future Houthi Threat to the Middle East

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Madame President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you today. I am Dr. Michael Knights, the Jill and Jay Bernstein Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.¹ I am a scholar of conflicts in Yemen and recently completed the first two books of a three-volume history of the post-2015 Yemen war.

My organization, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, has undertaken some of the most detailed investigative work into the threat posed by the Houthi movement, also known as Ansar Allah.² Working with a range of Yemeni and international coauthors, our fieldwork and desk research have produced an interactive maritime attack tracker³ and four major studies on the Houthi movement,⁴ all of which can be viewed on The Washington Institute's website.⁵

Today's emergency session on the current and future threat posed by the Houthi movement is urgently needed. The Houthis have (with strong Iranian backing and encouragement) exploited the enfeeblement of the Yemeni government since the Arab Spring of 2011, expanding through military conquests and seizing the capital, Sanaa, from the internationally recognized government in a September 2014 military coup.⁶

Since then, the Houthis have overrun Yemen's Red Sea ports, and tried to seize the port city of Aden⁷ and the energy hub of Marib.⁸ With sustained military support from Iran, they remain postured to lunge forward at any time to snuff out the last strongholds of the internationally recognized government of Yemen.⁹

The Houthis are a clan-based military junta whose leaders have (since the 1980s) modeled their movement on Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁰ Their ideology is supremacist, in favor of their own genealogical caste over all other Yemenis¹¹—and in their motto, they curse all Jewish people and openly pledge to seek the destruction of Israel and the United States.¹²

The Houthis are aggressive and expansionist, presenting a multifaceted threat that I will briefly summarize today. Far from being an isolated, localized movement, they now draw military, intelligence, and financial support from global partners that include Iran,¹³ Hezbollah,¹⁴ Iran-backed militias in Iraq,¹⁵ the al-Qaeda and al-Shabab terrorist organizations,¹⁶ and reportedly also the Russian Federation.¹⁷

The first dimension of threat posed by the Houthis manifests inside Yemen itself. Their movement is documented by the UN Panel of Experts¹⁸ and other authorities and nongovernmental organizations¹⁹ to have committed gross human rights abuses against the populations under its control: indoctrinating child soldiers;²⁰ unlawfully detaining and torturing opponents;²¹ and diverting vital humanitarian assistance.²² They

have kidnapped and still detain UN personnel,²³ civil society workers,²⁴ foreign seafarers,²⁵ and staff of diplomatic missions.²⁶ Since the 2018 Stockholm Agreement, the Houthis have consistently violated the cease-fire;²⁷ refused to demilitarize the Red Sea ports, as required under the agreement;²⁸ violated the UN arms embargo (with Iranian assistance);²⁹ and used drone attacks to prevent the internationally recognized government of Yemen from exporting existing oil and gas production that would place desperately needed funds in the government's hands.³⁰

This brings me to the second dimension of the Houthi threat—the danger that it poses to regional states in the Middle East and Africa. Between 2015 and 2021, the Houthis fired more than 430 missiles and more than 850 drones against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.³¹ Key components of these missile and drone systems were found by the UN Panel of Experts³² and by other authorities³³ to have been sent to Yemen—*through* the UN arms embargo—via Iranian government smuggling networks.³⁴

The Houthis continue to threaten such attacks in order to force concessions and shape the peace process to their advantage—most recently on July 7, 2024, when they publicly threatened to attack Saudi Arabia's ports, airports, and central bank.³⁵

Following Hamas's brutal terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the Houthis also intentionally drew Yemen into the Gaza conflict by firing around 200 missiles and 170 drones at Israel.³⁶ By attacking Israel, the Houthis deliberately risked bringing retaliation onto Yemen's ports, airports, and fuel storage facilities, endangering humanitarian access to Yemen. The Stockholm Agreement was initially motivated by the need to protect *these exact sites*, and now the Houthis have squandered half a decade of diplomacy by opening a new military front against a distant enemy. The current exchange of fire between the Houthis and Israel will surely worsen in the coming weeks and months, but the Houthis can still choose to end the cycle.

The final dimension of the Houthi threat is global—the antishipping campaign carried out against civilian and military vessels in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. The Washington Institute's maritime attack tracker³⁷ recently tallied 106 confirmed Houthi strikes on shipping since November 2023, and the Houthi leadership boasts of even higher numbers.³⁸ In these unprovoked attacks, the Houthis have sunk two civilian ships;³⁹ seized and held another, the *Galaxy Leader*, and its crew; killed at least four merchant seamen; worsened food security issues in Yemen and the Red Sea;⁴⁰ inflicted higher shipping costs and consumer prices on the global economy;⁴¹ robbed Egypt of more than \$7 billion in canal fees;⁴² and greatly increased the risk of an unprecedented environmental disaster in the Red Sea.⁴³

Use of the Suez Canal has halved since the attacks began and at least twenty-nine major global shipping companies now sail around the entire African continent,⁴⁴ as they were forced to do before the canal's opening in 1869. Ships and persons from eighty-five countries have thus far been affected,⁴⁵ including all the permanent members of the Security Council and four other current council members—Japan, Malta, South Korea, and Switzerland.⁴⁶ In other words, the Houthis have made unprovoked attacks for over a year against most of the countries on the globe.

As the Houthis can deter the return of shipping by attacking just a handful of vessels each month, they may view attacks on commercial vessels as an enduring lever that they can utilize at will—to champion a cause, to gain favor from a great power, or to extort payments and political concessions from regional powers and shippers. The Houthis thus resemble a knife held against one of the world's most important trade arteries.

Under these circumstances, it is easy to foresee further grave future implications for global commerce if the Houthis (1) fail to fundamentally and permanently alter their aggressive and reckless behavior; and (2) are left in control of the Red Sea littoral, drawing upon the support of Iran and other military suppliers.

In addition to fully enforcing all prior UN resolutions involving the Houthi movement,⁴⁷ I therefore urge the Security Council and its members to do the following:

- Restate the demand in UN Security Council Resolution 2722 that the Houthis “immediately cease” all attacks on shipping.
- Demand that all Houthi attacks on Israel cease immediately.
- Once again, call upon Iran to cease its documented violations of the UN arms embargo.

- Condemn all Houthi threats of force against the internationally recognized government of Yemen and against regional states, as these military threats distort the UN-backed road map for peace in Yemen, tilting it in the Houthis' favor and thus making it less equitable and less sustainable.

Expecting the Houthis to respect the Security Council is pointless, however, unless there are teeth behind our words. To remove the means by which the Houthis undertake these attacks, the Security Council and its members should:

- Strengthen the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM),⁴⁸ which is meant to enforce the arms embargo.
- Prepare UN sanctions on those shippers and flag states that violate UN Security Council resolutions through bypassing UN inspections, or by failing to allow inspections-at-sea when presented with evidence of arms smuggling using their flagged vessels.
- Call upon all member states to support the efforts of the internationally recognized government of Yemen to interdict arms smuggled via Yemen's land border with Oman, and via government-held ports in Yemen.

Finally, the Security Council and its members should put the Houthis on notice that continued unprovoked attacks on the world's nations will progressively have severe consequences for the group's ability to control territory in Yemen. To convey this warning, the Security Council should:

- Reaffirm the legitimacy of the internationally recognized government of Yemen, represented by the Presidential Leadership Council.
- Underline that government's inherent right to call for international assistance to defend itself from Houthi aggression.

On behalf of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, I wish to thank the Security Council and its members for this opportunity to provide this briefing today.

¹ The mission of The Washington Institute is to advance a balanced and realistic understanding of American interests in the Middle East and to promote the policies that secure them. The Institute is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization that is funded solely by the philanthropy of U.S. private citizens.

² For a full listing of our publications on the Houthi threat since 2009, see our website search engine result, available here <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis?keyword=Houthi&page=0>.

³ The Washington Institute's tracker—"Tracking Maritime Attacks in the Middle East Since 2019"—is produced by Noam Raydan and Farzin Nadimi and is available here: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/756ca769315d4b879ca7fdd6bd4a82be>. The Washington Institute's Maritime Spotlight platform is available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/maritime-spotlight>.

⁴ See Michael Knights, "The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 8 (2018); Michael Knights, Adnan al-Gabarni, and Casey Coombs, "The Houthi Jihad Council: Command and Control in 'the Other Hizballah,'" *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 10 (2022); Michael Knights, *An Heir and a Spare? How Yemen's "Southern Hezbollah" Could Change Iran's Deterrent Calculus*, Policy Note 142 (Washington Institute, 2023); and Michael Knights, "A Draw Is a Win: The Houthis After One Year of War," *CTC Sentinel* 17, no. 9 (2024).

⁵ The website can be found here: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/>.

⁶ See Danya Greenfield, "Yemen's Coup in All But Name," Atlantic Council, January 23, 2015. Also see Michael Knights and Farzin Nadimi, "Yemen's 'Southern Hezbollah' Celebrates Coup Anniversary in Deadly Fashion," PolicyWatch 3790, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 28, 2023.

⁷ This episode of the war is the subject of my 2023 book, *25 Days to Aden: The Unknown Story of Arabian Elite Forces at War*.

⁸ This episode of the war is the subject of my 2024 book, *The Race for Mukalla: Arabian Elite Forces and the War Against al-Qaeda*.

⁹ See "Houthi Aggression and a Roadmap for Peace in Yemen," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 4, 2024.

¹⁰ See Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (RAND, 2010); Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Abdullah Hamidaddin, ed., *The Huthi Movement in Yemen: Ideology, Ambition and Security in the Arab Gulf* (King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 2022); and Knights, Gabarni, and Coombs, "The Houthi Jihad Council."

¹¹ Most key Houthi leaders until today are Saada—collectively, Ahl al-Bait, who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad—thus seeing themselves as superior to other Yemenis and the only caste fit for leadership. Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*.

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- ¹² Since 2001, the Houthi slogan (the Scream, or *al-Sarkha*) has been: “Death to America / Death to Israel / Curse upon the Jews / Victory to Islam.”
- ¹³ For a detailed visual guide to Iranian support, see U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iran: Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East,” February 2024, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Iran_Houthi_Final2.pdf.
- ¹⁴ See Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*.
- ¹⁵ Adnan al-Jabarni, “A New Axis: Strategic Coordination Between the Houthis and Iraqi Factions,” Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, July 15, 2024. See also “ Hamas, Houthis Open Offices in Iraq,” Foundation for Defense of Democracies, September 17, 2024.
- ¹⁶ “Letter Dated 11 October 2024 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen Addressed to the President of the Security Council: Relationship Between Houthis and the Terrorist Organizations al-Qaida in the Arab Peninsula and al-Shabaab,” 24–25. Also see Katie Bo Lillis, Kylie Atwood, and Natasha Bertrand, “U.S. Intelligence Assesses Houthis in Yemen in Talks to Provide Weapons to al-Shabaab in Somalia, Officials Say,” CNN, June 11, 2024. Also see “Houthis Continue Regional and Global Expansion, Networking with Terror Groups and State Sponsors of Terrorism,” Soufan Center, November 5, 2024.
- ¹⁷ John Irish, Parisa Hafezi, and Jonathan Landay, “Exclusive: Iran Brokering Talks to Send Advanced Russian Missiles to Yemen’s Houthis, Sources Say,” Reuters, September 24, 2024. Also see “Russia Provides Targeting Support to Houthi Attacks on Commercial Shipping,” Foundation for Defense of Democracies, October 26, 2024.
- ¹⁸ “Letter Dated 11 October 2024: Acts That Violate International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law,” 34–39.
- ¹⁹ To give one example of many, Amnesty International, “Yemen: Huthis Must Stop Executions and Release Dozens Facing LGBTI charges,” Amnesty International, February 9, 2024.
- ²⁰ “Letter Dated 11 October 2024: Acts That Violate,” 34–39.
- ²¹ “Letter Dated 11 October 2024: Acts That Violate,” 34–39.
- ²² “Letter Dated 11 October 2024: Obstruction of Access to, and Delivery and Distribution of, Humanitarian Assistance,” pp. 39–40.
- ²³ “Letter Dated 11 October 2024: Arbitrary Detention and Enforced Disappearance,” 37.
- ²⁴ “Letter Dated 11 October 2024: Arbitrary Detention and Enforced Disappearance,” 37.
- ²⁵ “Letter Dated 11 October 2024, Annex 31: Hijacking by the Houthis of the *Galaxy Leader* on 19 November 2023,” 2, 126–30.
- ²⁶ See 15 October 2024 S/PV.9748—the Security Council’s monthly meeting on Yemen.
- ²⁷ Ceasefire violations are detailed in each UN Panel of Experts report. See “Letter Dated 11 October 2024, Annex 25: Houthi Military Escalation,” 105–6.
- ²⁸ Elana DeLozier, “The Hodeida Redeployment Plan: A Slow Start in Yemen,” PolicyWatch 3085, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 26, 2019.
- ²⁹ U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iran: Enabling Houthi Attacks.”
- ³⁰ “Houthis Attack Yemeni Oil Terminal in Latest Assault,” Al Jazeera, November 22, 2022.
- ³¹ Reuters, “Houthis Have Fired 430 Missiles, 851 Drones at Saudi Arabia Since 2015,” December 26, 2021.
- ³² See the full listing of Panel of Experts reports, all of which detail Iranian provision of arms to the Houthis, in violation of the 2015 UN arms embargo: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/sanctions-committee-documents/?ctype=Yemen&cbtype=yemen.
- ³³ U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iran: Enabling Houthi Attacks.”
- ³⁴ U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iran: Enabling Houthi Attacks.”
- ³⁵ “Houthis Threaten Saudi Arabia with Attacks on Airports, Oil Installations,” *Arab Weekly*, July 9, 2024. The Houthi leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, threatened: “We will target banks for banks, Riyadh airport for Sana’a airport, and ports for ports.”
- ³⁶ Emanuel Fabian, “Houthi Drone Crashes in South as Terror Group Said to Brace for Major Israeli Attack,” *Times of Israel*, December 25, 2024.
- ³⁷ Noam Raydan and Farzin Nadimi, “Houthi Shipping Attacks: Patterns and Expectations for 2025,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 16, 2024. Also see Raydan and Nadimi, “Tracking Maritime Attacks in the Middle East Since 2019.”
- ³⁸ “Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea: Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, September 6, 2024.
- ³⁹ Matthew Miller, “Houthi Sinking of Merchant Ships in the Red Sea,” U.S. Department of State, June 20, 2024.
- ⁴⁰ “Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea,” Congressional Research Service.
- ⁴¹ “Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea,” Congressional Research Service.
- ⁴² Ian Lewis, “Red Sea Crisis Costs Egypt \$7bn as Suez Canal Revenues Plummet,” *TradeWinds*, December 27, 2024.
- ⁴³ Agence France-Presse, “Sinking of *Rubymar* in Red Sea Poses Grave Environmental Risks, Experts Warn,” March 5, 2024.
- ⁴⁴ U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, “Houthi Attacks Placing Pressure on International Trade,” April 5, 2024.
- ⁴⁵ DIA, “Houthi Attacks Placing Pressure.”
- ⁴⁶ DIA, “Houthi Attacks Placing Pressure.”
- ⁴⁷ On January 10, 2024, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2722, calling on the Houthis to cease attacking commercial vessels and to release the *Galaxy Leader* and its crew.
- ⁴⁸ Established under UN Security Council Resolution 2216 and renewed annually, the Resolution 2140 Yemen sanctions regime was renewed on November 13, 2024, under S/RES/2758. See <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/yemen/>.