

Countering the Houthi Threat to Shipping: Regional Implications and U.S. Policy

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Feb 6, 2024

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Brief Analysis

Three experts address the thorny strategic questions arising from attacks on global shipping by the Yemen-based group.

On February 1, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Simon Henderson, Michael Knights, and Noam Raydan. Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute. Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow at the Institute and author of the study “[An Heir and a Spare? How Yemen’s ‘Southern Hezbollah’ Could Change Iran’s Deterrent Calculus](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/heir-and-spare-how-yemens-southern-hezbollah-could-change-irans-deterrent-calculus) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/heir-and-spare-how-yemens-southern-hezbollah-could-change-irans-deterrent-calculus>).” Raydan is an Institute senior fellow and a co-creator (with Senior Fellow Farzin Nadimi) of the interactive map “[Tracking Maritime Attacks in the Middle East Since 2019](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019>).”

Simon Henderson

The United States and Britain, despite their long history of arming Arab Gulf allies with advanced military equipment, find themselves largely unsupported in their military actions against Houthi militants in the Red Sea aimed at keeping vital sea-lanes open. In Europe, France has offered some help, but the European Union has only recently announced plans to contribute additional naval forces. A recent near-miss by a Houthi cruise missile headed for a U.S. ship highlights the stakes and urgent need for more robust international support to safeguard maritime security.

The reluctance of the Arab Gulf allies, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to actively participate in military efforts against Houthi forces stems from complex geopolitical and strategic considerations. In 2018, the Saudi-Emirati coalition undertook a significant military offensive aimed at reclaiming Yemeni coastal territory from Houthi control, a move designed to prevent further Houthi maritime attacks and ensure the security of Red Sea shipping lanes. Saudi Arabia, directly affected by the threat to shipping and currently engaged in peace negotiations with the Houthis, appears cautious to avoid jeopardizing diplomatic efforts. The UAE, with its limited military engagement focused on Yemen’s south, exhibits a similar hesitance, reflecting a broader regional recalibration of military and diplomatic strategies amid ongoing conflicts and the precarious balance of regional power dynamics.

The economic fallout from the crisis in the Red Sea, particularly for Egypt, highlights the interconnected nature of regional security and global trade. The reduction in Suez Canal traffic directly affects Egypt’s foreign currency revenues, emphasizing the broader economic implications of the conflict. Amid limited military involvement from allies, the collective response remains insufficient to address the escalating threats. This situation calls into question the capacity and willingness of regional powers to safeguard crucial maritime routes, accentuating the need for a more concerted, effective international strategy to ensure the free flow of global commerce.

The crisis in the Red Sea, beyond its immediate security implications, poses a significant threat to the principle of free navigation and the global trade network, emphasizing strategic choke points such as the Suez Canal. The response, or lack thereof, from regional Arab Gulf allies and the broader international community reflects a cautious calculation of risks, diplomatic ties, and the potential consequences of further escalation. As the situation evolves, the ability of the United States and its allies to galvanize a more concerted and effective international response will be crucial in mitigating the threat to international shipping, ensuring the safety of maritime routes, and upholding the principles of global trade and security.

Michael Knights

The Houthi movement’s evolution within the “axis of resistance,” which includes Iran, Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and Hamas, showcases its transition from a peripheral to a central position, especially in its support for Hamas. This transformation has been marked by the group’s active engagement in globalizing the conflict, thereby imposing an economic cost on the international community. The Houthis’ commitment is further evidenced by their unique actions within the axis of resistance, such as the launching of ballistic missiles toward Israel, highlighting their dedication to the cause. This shift is attributed to their alignment with and modeling after Iranian and Hezbollah operational and organizational structures, including the establishment of a Jihad Council, indicating a deep-rooted ideological synergy with the objectives of the axis.

Houthi operations do suggest a level of independence from Iran guided by shared objectives rather than direct command. This relationship stresses the Houthis’ commitment to expanding Iran’s Islamic Revolution and their admiration for Iran and Hezbollah as mentors. Despite their autonomy, the Houthis’ actions remain consistent with the wider goals of the axis of resistance. The potential for de-escalation in the region hinges on broader geopolitical shifts, including the outcome in Gaza, suggesting that Houthi military engagements are closely tied to the broader strategic landscape of the axis.

Addressing the Houthis’ threat to maritime security requires a multifaceted approach, including depleting their arsenal, coercing Iran to mitigate support for the group, and directly challenging Houthi capabilities within Yemen. Each strategy presents its own challenges and imperfections, yet collectively they aim to curtail the Houthis’ ability to disrupt international shipping. Success in these endeavors requires sustained international effort, closer surveillance, and potential military and security assistance to counterbalance Houthi influence. The complexity of the situation is amplified by the need to navigate geopolitical intricacies, including the roles of the Arab Gulf states and the broader international community in securing maritime routes.

The implications of Arab Gulf state involvement and the international community’s response to the Houthi threat reflect a nuanced landscape of regional politics, military strategies, and economic considerations. The associated discussion touches on the complexities of Yemen’s political situation, the impact of international policies on regional dynamics, and the potential for changing military and diplomatic strategies to address the threats posed by the Houthis. This context underscores the importance of a coordinated, strategic approach to addressing the challenges in Yemen and the Red Sea, balancing military action with diplomatic efforts to achieve stability and secure maritime commerce.

Noam Raydan

Since November 19, 2023, with the hijacking of the *Galaxy Leader* vehicle carrier, the Houthis **have targeted around thirty commercial vessels** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019>) in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Attacks along these waterways and other shipping lanes in the region, of course, predate the onset of the Hamas-Israel war, but the recent escalation has been striking, demanding a more assertive international response. Since the United States and Britain began their campaign of airstrikes against Houthi military sites on January 12, 2024, ten ships have been targeted in response, demonstrating the ongoing threat to international shipping and other sea traffic. Houthi attacks have disrupted global trade routes, prompting more than ten shipping firms to halt transit through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Much longer trade journeys have thus been required, with ships detouring all the way south to the Cape of Good Hope to avoid the Suez Canal. Houthi aggression has not been limited to attacks on shipping with direct Israeli links. Container ships, oil tankers, liquefied natural gas carriers, bulk carriers, and other ships of various provenance now face delays lasting weeks, with corresponding impacts on global trade flows. Companies relying on longstanding shipping routes are desperate for a return to stability and predictability.

The repercussions are apparent both near and far. Egypt's economy, heavily reliant on Suez Canal toll revenues, recently reported a significant decline, illustrating the wide-reaching effects of changing trade patterns—as well as broader links between global trade, regional stability, and economic resilience and their short- and longer-term consequences. In Europe, where the Russian war against Ukraine is entering its third year, increased shipping costs could result in price hikes for commodities in coming months.

Houthi attacks and the resulting diversion of shipping have exposed a range geopolitical tensions and strategic vulnerabilities. In the coming weeks and months, the international community must work collaboratively and remain vigilant in adapting to continuing Yemen-based attacks, including as they apply to shipping, regional stability, and global economic trends.

This summary was prepared by Abdullah Hayek. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖

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