THE HOUTHIS' MARITIME STRATEGY IN THE RED SEA AS A COUNTER-HEGEMONY TO ZIONISM IN THE REGION

THESIS

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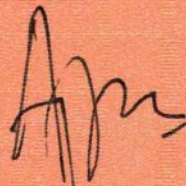Dr. Virtuous Setyaka, S.IP., M.Si
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PREFACE

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1

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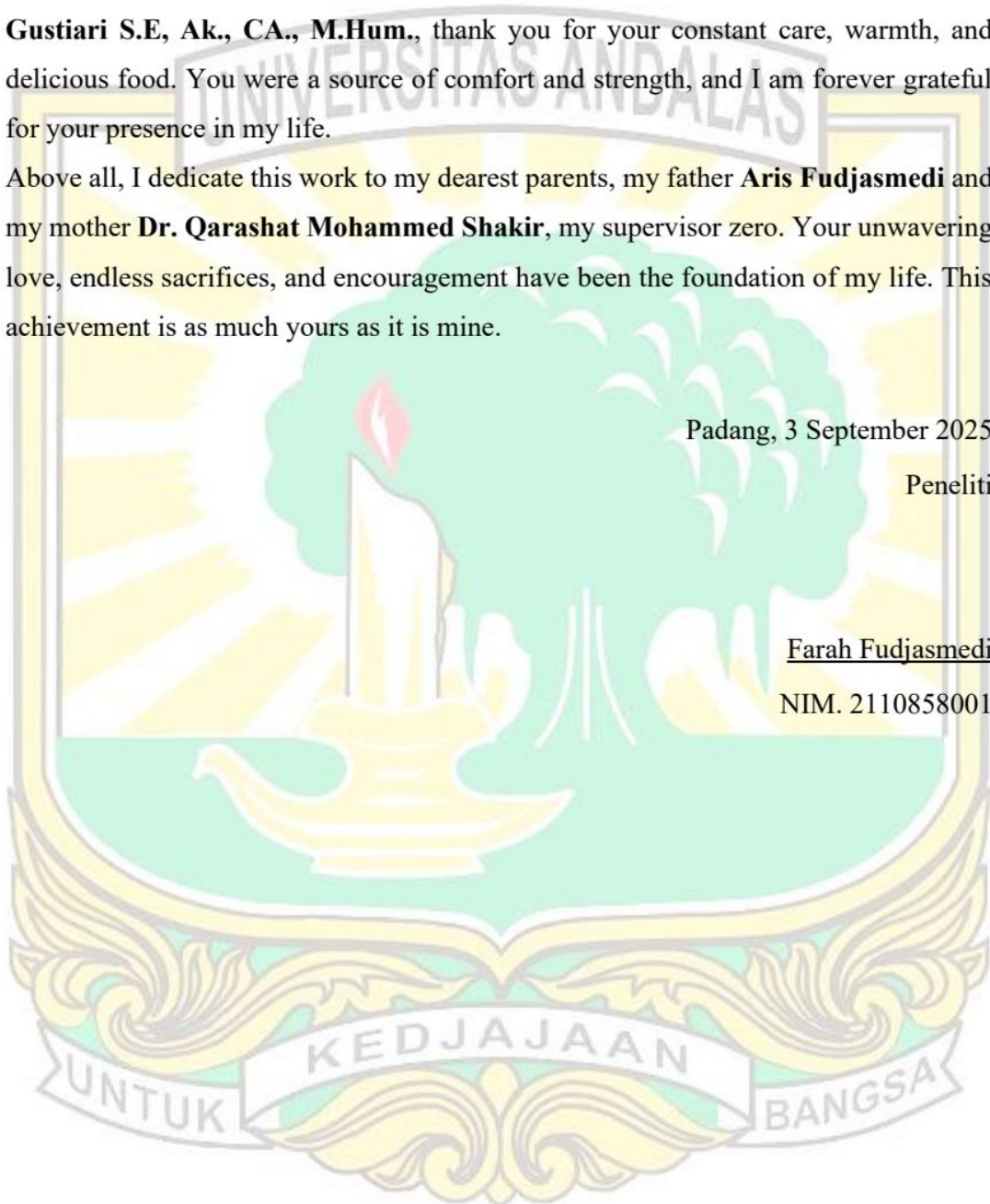
Above all, I dedicate this work to my dearest parents, my father **Aris Fudjasmedi** and my mother **Dr. Qarashat Mohammed Shakir**, my supervisor zero. Your unwavering love, endless sacrifices, and encouragement have been the foundation of my life. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine.

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the maritime strategy of the Houthis in the Red Sea during 2023-2024, focusing on how their actions challenge the established regional power structures linked to Israeli influence. The study applies a critical theoretical framework to explore the intersection of material power, ideological narratives, and institutional developments that shape the Houthis' approach. Using a qualitative, descriptive-analytical method, the research analyzes secondary data from academic articles, official reports, and media sources to trace the evolution of the Houthis' maritime operations and their impact on regional security and global trade. Findings reveal that the Houthis employ asymmetric tactics—such as missile strikes, drone attacks, and naval interdictions—to disrupt maritime traffic and assert counter-hegemonic resistance. Their campaign demonstrates a sophisticated blend of military innovation and ideological solidarity with Palestinian causes, significantly affecting shipping routes, regional stability, and international responses. The study concludes that the Houthis represent a complex non-state actor capable of challenging dominant regional hegemony through military means and ideological contestation, thereby reshaping security dynamics in a vital global maritime corridor.

Keywords:
Houthis; Maritime strategy; Regional hegemony; Red Sea security; Historical Structure Analysis

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji strategi maritim gerakan Houthi di Laut Merah selama periode 2023-2024, dengan fokus pada bagaimana tindakan mereka menantang struktur kekuasaan regional yang berafiliasi dengan pengaruh Israel. Studi ini menggunakan kerangka teori kritis untuk mengeksplorasi pertemuan antara kekuatan material, narasi ideologis, dan perkembangan institusional yang membentuk pendekatan Houthi. Dengan metode kualitatif deskriptif-analitis, penelitian ini menganalisis data sekunder dari artikel akademik, laporan resmi, dan sumber media untuk menelusuri evolusi operasi maritim Houthi serta dampaknya terhadap keamanan regional dan perdagangan global. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Houthi menggunakan taktik asimetris seperti serangan misil, serangan drone, dan intersepsi kapal untuk mengganggu lalu lintas maritim dan menegaskan perlawanan kontra-hegemonik. Kampanye mereka mencerminkan perpaduan yang sofistikasi antara inovasi militer dan solidaritas ideologis dengan perjuangan Palestina, yang secara signifikan memengaruhi rute pelayaran, stabilitas kawasan, dan respons internasional. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa Houthi merupakan aktor non-negara yang kompleks dan mampu menantang hegemoni regional dominan melalui upaya militer dan kontestasi ideologis, sehingga merubah dinamika keamanan di koridor maritim global yang vital.

Kata kunci: Houthi; Strategi maritim; Hegemoni regional; Keamanan Laut Merah; Analisis Struktur Sejarah

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GT	: Gross Tons
ISR	: Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
US	: United States
EU	: European Union
UAE	: United Arab Emirates
m GT	: Million Gross Tons
SNA	: Saudi Arabia
UN	: United Nations
LNG	: Liquefied Natural Gas
IMO	: International Maritime Organization
NGO	: Non-Governmental Organization
GDP	: Gross Domestic Product
GDP	: Gross Domestic Product
NATO	: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
MSMEs	: Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises
FOB	: Free on Board
OPEC	: Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
FDI	: Foreign Direct Investment

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Over recent years, global conflicts have surged, shifting power dynamics and regional hegemonies. [1]These developments have deeply affected the global economic, security, and political spheres, as major powers and regional rivals contest influence. Modern conflicts, complex and protracted, ripple beyond battlefields, triggering humanitarian crises, disrupting supply chains, and undermining international norms, posing profound threats to global stability and prosperity.

In October 2023, following the Hamas and allied Palestinian militants' Operation Al-Aqsa Flood ("Toofan Al-Aqsa"), missiles launched from Yemen targeted the northern Red Sea, likely aiming at Israel's southern port city, Eilat. The U.S. Department of Defense confirmed tracking these launches but could not verify specific targets.[2] Subsequently, on November 19, 2023, Yemen's Houthi militia hijacked the commercial vessel MV Galaxy Leader in the Red Sea, asserting solidarity with Palestinians by labeling the ship heading to Israel and taking 25 international crew hostage, escalating their threats against Israeli-affiliated shipping.[3]

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[1] World Economic Forum. "Why Global Cooperation Is More Important Than Ever in a World at War." *2025 Global Risks Report Summary*. Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2025.

[2] Acta Universitatis Danubius. "Analysis of Economic Effects of International Conflicts." *Acta Universitatis Danubius*, 2024.

[3] Lieber Institute. "The Legal Context of Operations Al-Aqsa Flood and Swords of Iron." Washington, DC: Lieber Institute for Strategic Studies, September 2024.

This represented a sharp intensification of Houthi involvement, from missile strikes against Israel to disrupting vital maritime trade routes, with looming threats to the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The Houthis declared their attacks would continue until Israel ceases Gaza operations, with spokesman Yahya Saree warning that any Israeli-linked ship would be a legitimate target, urging maritime workers to avoid such vessels.[4]

The Houthi attacks must be seen as a forceful and symbolic rejection of Israeli military actions in Gaza. By expanding their operations, the Houthis signal solidarity with Palestine and oppose what they view as Israeli aggression and occupation. Their response reflects resistance not merely to military assaults but to the underlying political and ideological dominance shaping this conflict. At the core lies hegemony, the pervasive dominance by ideologies or systems shaping political, economic, and cultural regional realities. Here, Zionist hegemony signifies the political and ideological leadership rooted in Zionism, a movement advocating for a Jewish state in Palestine, embodied by Israel. This hegemony shapes narratives, policies, and alliances, securing Israeli strategic interests, marginalizing Palestinian aspirations, and alternative visions.[5]

Parallel is the hegemony of capitalism, manifested globally through market-driven principles of private ownership, capital accumulation, and profit maximization. Capitalist hegemony shapes state policies, trade, and investments, reinforcing

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[4] *Middle East Monitor*. "Houthis Declare Naval Blockade of Haifa Port," May 2025.
[5] *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*. "Toward Religious Zionist Hegemony in Israel," 2019.

inequalities and empowering states and corporations to control strategic resources and routes, including critical maritime corridors like the Red Sea. This economic dominance underpins geopolitical structures aligned with Zionist interests by enabling power projection and international support.[6]

These intertwined hegemonies frame the Israel-Palestine conflict and broader West Asia geopolitics. The Houthis' rejection of Israeli Gaza operations represents resistance to both direct military aggression stemming from Zionist hegemony and systemic inequalities propagated by global capitalist dominance. Their targeting of Israeli-affiliated maritime traffic symbolizes defiance against layered hegemonic forces governing the region's political and economic realities. Thus, the Houthis are not merely a local insurgency but an actor in a broader confrontation challenging the hegemony that dictates regional order, sovereignty, and security. Understanding these hegemonies is essential to grasping why the conflict transcends military engagement, encompassing ideological, economic, and geopolitical dimensions, fueling ongoing instability and resistance.

The Houthis, identifying themselves as Islamic warriors and defenders of Palestine, oppose Israel and its allies. Ansar Allah ("Partisans of God") is a Zaidi Shia Islamist political and armed movement that emerged in northern Yemen in the early 1990s. Originating as a reaction to Zaidi's marginalization and opposing the Yemeni government and foreign influences, particularly Saudi Arabia and the U.S., the

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[6] Rodriguez, Nestor. *Capitalism and Migration: The Rise of Hegemony in the World-System.* New York: Springer, 2023.

Houthis have played a central role in Yemen's civil war. Led by Abdul-Malik al-Houthi since 2004, they control significant territories, including Sanaa, Saada, Amran, and Al Mahwit, as well as the strategic port of Al Hudaydah, crucial for revenue and imports. Their ideology blends religious revivalism with political resistance to corruption and foreign intervention. Despite links to Iran, they maintain alliances with ideologically distinct groups such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, illustrating complex regional ties.[7]

These hostilities severely disrupted maritime traffic. Gulf of Aden shipping fell from 4.83 million gross tons (m GT) in December 2023 to 2.13 m GT in February 2024, a drop rising from 56% in January to 71% in February. Meanwhile, traffic around the Cape of Good Hope increased by 63% in January and 74% in February as vessels rerouted.[8] This shift caused container freight charges to surge by 219% on key routes like Shanghai to Northern Europe. Red Sea container shipping experienced a 90% reduction, forcing over 65 countries to divert 29 million tons of cargo via the longer Cape route, adding 10–14 days and approximately $1 million in fuel costs per voyage. Freight rates soared; Shanghai-to-Europe container charges rose 256% between December 2023 and February 2024, while Suez Canal transits halved from 2,068 in November 2023 to 877 in October 2024, costing Egypt around 60% of its canal revenue. The Russell Group estimates global trade disruptions due to these

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[7] *Wilson Center*. "Who Are Yemen's Houthis?" Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, March 2025.
[8] *Maritime Trade Analysis Group*. *Impact of 2023 Houthi Attacks on Red Sea Shipping*. London: MTAG, 2024.

hostilities at $1 trillion between October 2023 and May 2024, disproportionately affecting low-income nations dependent on just-in-time supply chains.[9]

The crisis also strains maritime policy frameworks, complicating carbon pricing and emissions regulation efforts. Rerouting increases carbon leakage risks and undermines systems like the EU Emissions Trading System. This underscores the urgent need for adaptable policies that balance geopolitical realities with sustainability and safety in global shipping.[10]

Europe and low-income countries bear the brunt, with Europe facing recession risks. Lessons from the Black Sea conflict following Russia's invasion of Ukraine inform shipping industry risk mitigation efforts. Nonetheless, a total Houthi blockade of the Red Sea would likely prompt stronger naval responses. Regional powers such as Egypt prioritize safeguarding sovereignty and maritime security, while Israel seeks Western allied assistance to counter maritime threats. Some Yemeni factions oppose the Houthis and express willingness to cooperate against them despite ongoing internal divisions, adding to regional tensions.[11]

International reactions have varied. UNSC Resolution 2722 (2024) condemned the attacks but saw abstentions from Russia and China, limiting enforcement. Sanctions targeting Houthi financiers and Iran-linked networks have yet to cripple their logistics, with diversified funding including an estimated $180 million monthly

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[9] *OceanMind*. "How the Red Sea Crisis Has Impacted International Shipping Activity," July 2025.

[10] *OceanMind, How the Red Sea Crisis.*
[11] *Russell Group. Global Trade Disruption Report 2024-2025*. London: Russell Group, 2025.

from Al Hudaydah port fees and informal networks. The U.S.-led coalition's Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPG), launched in December 2023 with over 20 nations involved, intercepted drones and missiles and degraded some Houthis capabilities via airstrikes. However, attacks intensified, reaching over 190 incidents by late 2024, indicating limited deterrence.[12]

Though military actions temporarily disrupted Houthi operations, the group has demonstrated resilience, adapted tactics, and exploited Western pressure for propaganda and recruitment. Bombings and sanctions have bolstered their narrative as defenders against foreign invasion, securing domestic and regional support rather than deterring escalation. Therefore, a critical review of international interventions reveals weaknesses, notably the lack of a cohesive regional strategy, complicating efforts to counter Houthis effectively. This situation highlights the need for a nuanced analysis of how the Houthis' strategies affected the existing systems, norms, and rules.[13]

1.2 Problem Statement

The escalation of Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea linked to Israel between 2023 and 2024 marks a significant intensification of their maritime strategy that directly challenges the established regional hegemony associated with Zionist political-military influence. While the Houthis publicly justify these attacks as solidarity with the Palestinian cause and opposition to Israeli actions in Gaza, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding of the underlying strategic,

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[12] U.S. Department of Defense. *Operation Prosperity Guardian Reports*, 2023–2024.
[13] Farea Al-Muslimi, "How Western Sanctions Have Empowered Houthi Propaganda," *Middle East Journal of Conflict Studies* 12, no. 3 (2020): 45-47.

ideological, and operational motivations driving their maritime campaign. This knowledge gap impedes the development of effective diplomatic and security responses to mitigate ongoing maritime disruptions, regional instability, and the broader contestation of power in the Red Sea. This research aims to investigate and elucidate the complex dynamics of the Houthis' maritime strategy as an expression of counter-hegemonic resistance to dominant regional forces, focusing on how their actions disrupt the existing maritime security order and reflect deeper ideological and material contestations in the West Asia region.

1.3 Research Question

In this research, the question is, how does the Houthis' counter-hegemonic strategy counter the historical bloc of Zionist hegemony in the region?

1.4 Research Objectives

Based on the question mentioned above, this research aims to:

1. To identify the main phases and adaptations in Houthi maritime operations since October 2023.

2. To analyze how these strategies disrupt regional maritime security and existing naval dominance.

1.5 Research Benefits

This research aims to achieve the following benefits:

1. Academically, this research is a valuable learning process for the author and other academics by providing an in-depth understanding of how non-state actors construct identities and strategies to challenge regional hegemony.

Further, it explains how these dynamics in influential relations impact power structures and affect international actors' interests, thus strengthening the conceptual rigor. By doing so, it updates and refines existing knowledge in international relations, moving beyond simplistic proxy or ideological explanations to offer a more nuanced analysis of the conflict in the Red Sea region.

2.   In practical terms, this research invites Arab and Muslim countries in the West Asia and North Africa region to recognize the crucial role of small groups and the significance of small yet strategic actions in disturbing regional security. It emphasizes that even at the grassroots level, unity and collective efforts can effectively confront the shared enemy threatening their sovereignty and stability. By raising awareness of the impact of coordinated movements, the study encourages these communities to strengthen solidarity and regional cooperation, fostering a collective commitment to address common geopolitical challenges and resist external domination.

1.6 Literature Review

In this section, the researcher referenced sources that address the Houthis' maritime campaign in the Red Sea since October 2023, which has garnered considerable scholarly and policy attention.

Debates have focused on whether the group's motivations stem from pragmatic self-interest, regional proxy dynamics, or ideological solidarity. The article by Jonah Carlson, published in 2024 with the title "Houthi Motivations Driving the Red Sea

Crisis: Understanding How Ansar Allah's Strategic Culture Goes beyond Gaza and Iran," provides a pivotal contribution to this debate by employing the cultural topography method to analyze the internal culture, motivations, and strategic behavior of Ansar Allah (the Houthi movement). This literature review situates Carlson's findings within the broader academic discourse and identifies gaps that this research may aim to address.

Carlson noted that earlier academic work on the Houthis primarily viewed them through the lens of sectarian identity and as proxies for Iranian regional ambitions. Before the Yemeni Civil War, scholars largely highlighted the movement's Zaydi Shi'ite origins while downplaying direct Iranian involvement, seeing them as a localized Yemeni phenomenon with limited external backing. However, after 2011, most analyses shifted to a realist framework as the conflict intensified. In this new perspective, the Houthis' actions were often interpreted as part of the broader Saudi-Iranian rivalry, with their religious identity frequently set aside in favor of their strategic and political goals. At this time, there was considerable debate about the extent and nature of Iranian influence.[14]

Carlson's 2024 article challenges this oversimplified view of the Houthis as simply Iranian proxies or actors solely driven by the Gaza conflict. Using the cultural topography method, the article reveals that while the Houthis publicly connect their Red Sea attacks to the war in Gaza, this linkage primarily serves as a cultural signal to rally domestic and regional support. The research underscores that the Houthis' true

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[14] Carlson, J. (2023). Houthi motivations driving the Red Sea crisis: Understanding how Ansar Allah's strategic culture goes beyond Gaza and Iran. Marine Corps University Journal.

17

motivations are deeply rooted in their Yemeni national identity, a pervasive siege mentality, and the pursuit of pragmatic and material benefits. For Carlson, the Gaza conflict acts as a pretext, not the main impetus, for their maritime aggression, suggesting their actions are likely to continue regardless of developments in Palestine.

The article's use of the cultural topography method provides a nuanced, constructivist viewpoint that complements traditional realist analyses. By meticulously coding primary sources such as Houthi-controlled media, leadership statements, and educational materials, Carlson uncovers the intricate interplay between identity, norms, values, and perceptual lenses that shape Houthi strategy. However, the article also acknowledges the inherent limitations of cultural explanations, integrating operational realities like material interests and military cooperation with Iran into the analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding.

Carlson's research significantly contributes to the understanding of the Houthis strategy. However, the researcher's work primarily focuses on elite rhetoric and cultural framing, with less emphasis on the operational dynamics and tactical evolution of Houthi maritime attacks. Additionally, the study does not systematically compare Houthi strategies with those of other regional non-state actors employing maritime or asymmetric challenges to hegemony. While Carlson acknowledges the likely persistence of Houthi aggression beyond the Gaza conflict, there is limited exploration of how the group's motivations and strategies have evolved in response to changing regional and international pressures. Building on these constructivist insights, this current research integrates a closer examination of the operational and tactical evolution of Houthi maritime strategy, placing these developments within the broader

context of regional power contestation. By addressing the identified empirical and comparative gaps, this study aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how and why the Houthis adapted their motivations and strategies to challenge regional hegemony through Red Sea attacks in 2023–2024.

The second source included in the literature review of this research discusses the recent escalations by the Houthi movement in targeting commercial shipping in the Red Sea, which has sparked renewed academic and policy interest in understanding the motivations and strategic calculations behind these actions. The academic journal article, "Yemeni Houthi Blockade of Israeli Merchant Ships in the Red Sea and Its Impact on Regional and Global Stability" by Mahardhika and Munzilin (2024), provides a comprehensive constructivist analysis of the Houthi blockade, focusing on the interplay of political, economic, military, and ideological factors. This literature review synthesizes the article's contributions and identifies gaps that this research will address. As mentioned, much of the previous literature has focused on two main themes: the Houthis as a destabilizing force in the Red Sea and the Red Sea's critical importance to global trade and security. While these studies highlight the threat posed by Houthi activities and the vulnerabilities of the region, they often stop short of dissecting how and why the Houthis have developed the operational capacity and political will to challenge regional hegemony through maritime attacks.[15]

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[15] Munzilin, K., & Putra, A. (2024). Yemeni Houthi blockade of Israeli merchant ships in the Red Sea and its impact on regional and global stability. International Journal of Political Science.

Mahardhika and Munzilin's document advances the field by employing constructivist theory to explain the Houthi blockade. The authors argue that the blockade is not merely a tactical response to Israeli actions in Gaza or only about material interests but a manifestation of constructed identities, norms, and values within the Houthi movement. The document details how the blockade influences and is influenced by the group's self-perception as a resistance force against Israeli and Western interference, as well as by the broader Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the United States' support for Israel. The research further demonstrates how non-state actors like the Houthis and their attacks have disrupted global shipping, increased economic and security risks, and triggered diplomatic tensions among regional and global actors. The authors use a qualitative, literature-based approach that draws on a wide array of secondary sources and situates the Houthi actions within the context of ongoing conflicts, including the Israel–Palestine war and the Yemeni civil war. It provides valuable insights into the immediate and cascading impacts of the blockade on regional and global stability, including the potential for humanitarian crises and economic losses.

Despite its strengths, Mahardhika and Munzilin's work leaves several important areas underexplored. It identifies the motivations behind the blockade but does not systematically analyze how Houthi maritime strategies have evolved or how tactical innovations have enabled them to sustain and escalate their campaign. Furthermore, the analysis also centers on external drivers and constructed identities but provides less detail on internal Houthi decision-making processes, factional interests, or the role of local Yemeni dynamics in shaping strategy. This work makes a significant contribution

by framing the Houthi blockade as a product of constructed identities and regional rivalries and highlighting its disruptive impact on regional and global stability. However, this current research seeks to fill the identified gaps by providing a more granular analysis of the evolving motivations and strategies of the Houthis, examining both internal and external factors, and situating their actions within a broader comparative and historical context.

The third source the researcher used is the work of Idrus, Purnama, and Hermawan (2024) in their article "Islamist Social Movement of Hamas Regarding Israel's Attack on Gaza from the Perspective of Critical Theory," which offers significant theoretical insight. Their study applies Robert Cox's Critical Theory alongside Social Movement Theory to analyze Hamas as an Islamist social movement, demonstrating how historical structures, material capabilities, ideological ideas, and institutional support shape resistance movements. The authors highlight the importance of identity, ideology, and social mobilization in understanding groups like Hamas, while also noting the influence of global power structures and media framing on perceptions of such movements.[16]

The analysis is particularly valuable for its robust application of Cox's Critical Theory, which emphasizes the interplay of material, ideational, and institutional factors in shaping the emergence and evolution of resistance movements. The authors' focus on the historical and social context of Hamas's formation, as well as the role of external

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[16] Idrus, M. R. H., Purnama, C., & Hermawan, Y. P. (2024). Islamist Social Movement of Hamas Regarding Israel's Attack on Gaza from the Perspective of Critical Theory. Jurnal Politik Profetik, 12(2), 151–169. https://doi.org/10.24252/profetik.

support and internal grievances, offers a model for analyzing similar dynamics in other regional resistance movements. However, the study by Idrus, Purnama, and Hermawan does not address the specific context of maritime conflict or the unique geopolitical environment of the Red Sea, as Hamas does not possess maritime operational capacity. This limitation underscores the need for research that is specifically tailored to the Houthis' evolving maritime strategies and operational tactics in the Red Sea context.

Complementing this perspective, recent scholarship, such as Jonah Carlson (2024), employs the cultural topography method to analyze the Houthis' motivations beyond simplistic proxy or ideological explanations. Carlson finds that the Houthis' attacks on Red Sea shipping are driven primarily by pragmatic considerations such as consolidating domestic support, crafting a strong national identity, and securing material benefits, rather than by ideological solidarity with Palestine or Iran. This constructivist approach reveals the internal cultural logic of the movement and highlights how the Houthis adapt their strategies to maximize political and economic gains.

Further empirical insights are provided by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) report (2024), which documents the phased evolution of Houthi maritime attacks, their expanded targeting criteria, and the operational sophistication demonstrated in hijacking vessels and controlling maritime traffic.[17] The report also notes the Houthis' establishment of a Humanitarian Operations Coordination Centre to regulate shipping and collect fees, illustrating their growing

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[17] International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Navigating Troubled Waters: The Houthis' Campaign in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024)

control over the Red Sea and the strategic use of maritime power to challenge regional hegemony.

This article by Idrus, Purnama, and Hermawan (2024) contributes a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing the ideological and social forces underpinning resistance movements, while Carlson's cultural topography method offers a nuanced understanding of the Houthis' internal motivations and pragmatism. The IISS report adds detailed operational and strategic context specific to maritime conflict.

The fourth source highlights the profound impact of Houthi insurgent activities on maritime traffic in the Red Sea and the broader implications for global trade and security. The study by Rodriguez-Diaz, Alcaide, and Garcia-Llave (2024), "Challenges and Security Risks in the Red Sea: Impact of Houthi Attacks on Maritime Traffic," provides a rigorous, data-driven analysis of the disruptions caused by Houthi attacks between November 2023 and February 2024. The authors employ a combination of descriptive statistics, qualitative content analysis, and geospatial methods to assess changes in maritime traffic patterns and operational efficiency across key shipping routes.[18]

They demonstrate that Houthi attacks have led to dramatic declines in vessel transits through the Gulf of Aden and Suez Canal, with traffic reductions exceeding 70% in some sectors. In contrast, maritime activity around the Cape of Good Hope surged by 74%, reflecting a significant rerouting of global shipping to avoid conflict

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[18] Emilio Rodriguez-Diaz, J. I. Alcaide, and R. Garcia-Llave, "Challenges and Security Risks in the Red Sea: Impact of Houthi Attacks on Maritime Traffic," *Journal of Marine Science and Engineering* 12, no. 11 (2024): 1900, https://doi.org/10.3390/jmse12111900

zones. The economic consequences are substantial: container freight rates on major routes such as Shanghai–Northern Europe increased by as much as 219%, while operational costs for affected vessels rose by an average of 18%. The authors also document a comprehensive catalog of security incidents, highlighting the use of drones, missiles, and piracy tactics against both commercial and military vessels.

Beyond immediate operational and economic impacts, Rodriguez-Diaz, Alcaide, and Garcia-Llave situate the Houthi campaign within the context of other recent disruptions to global shipping, such as the Ukraine war and the COVID-19 pandemic. Their analysis underscores the unique vulnerability of maritime chokepoints to non-state actor aggression and the interconnectedness of global trade and security. The study concludes with a call for enhanced maritime security protocols and international cooperation to safeguard vital trade routes, while also acknowledging the environmental consequences of increased fuel consumption and rerouted shipping.

This research makes a significant contribution by providing empirical evidence of the direct and quantifiable impacts of Houthi attacks on maritime traffic and global supply chains. Their study fills a notable gap in the literature by systematically analyzing the correlation between regional instability and disruptions to maritime logistics, while also highlighting the environmental and economic ramifications of conflict-induced rerouting. The authors' use of authoritative datasets and geospatial analysis offers a robust foundation for understanding the spatial and temporal dynamics of maritime insecurity. However, the study, while comprehensive in its assessment of operational and economic impacts, does not delve deeply into the evolving motivations and internal decision-making processes of the Houthi movement.

24

The broader literature, including reports from the IISS and analyses by Mahardhika and Munzilin as mentioned before, addresses these aspects to some extent, but there remains a need for a more granular and longitudinal examination of how Houthi strategies have adapted in response to changing regional and international pressures. Additionally, while the environmental consequences of rerouting are acknowledged, there is limited analysis of the long-term ecological impacts or the effectiveness of international responses to maritime security threats.

The final source in this section is a research briefing from the House of Commons Library, authored by its specialist research staff and published on 4 February 2025, which offers a comprehensive, evidence-based overview of the Houthi movement's maritime campaign in the Red Sea and the multifaceted international response from late 2023 through early 2025. This briefing stands as a significant resource for understanding the evolving motivations and strategies of the Houthis, as well as the legal, military, and diplomatic dimensions of the crisis.[19]

The document begins by contextualizing the Houthi movement within the broader landscape of Yemen's civil war, tracing its origins as a Zaydi Shia group in the 1990s and its rise to power after capturing Sana'a in 2014. It explores the group's alignment with Iran, detailing the military, financial, and political support that has enabled the Houthis to sustain their operations and expand their influence. The briefing also notes the Houthis' engagement with other international actors, such as Russia, and

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[19] House of Commons Library. UK and International Response to Houthis in the Red Sea 2024/25. Research Briefing, 4 February 2025. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9930/CBP-9930.pdf.

their opportunistic alliances with various armed groups, including alleged coordination with Al-Qaeda and Iraqi militias. This analysis underscores the Houthis' ability to leverage regional rivalries and global power dynamics to advance their objectives.

A central contribution of the briefing is its detailed account of the Houthis' maritime campaign, which escalated significantly following the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023. The report documents the group's shift from targeting Israeli-linked vessels to launching attacks against ships associated with a wide range of nations, thereby disrupting global shipping and threatening the free flow of commerce through one of the world's most critical maritime corridors. The briefing quantifies the impact of these attacks, citing a 64% reduction in Red Sea container ship capacity and a surge in shipping costs and transit times as vessels reroute around the Cape of Good Hope. The economic consequences are substantial, with Egypt's Suez Canal revenues falling by 60% and global supply chains facing heightened inflationary pressures.

The briefing provides a thorough analysis of the international response, including the launch of US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian and the EU's Operation Aspides, both aimed at safeguarding maritime traffic. It details the participation of over 20 countries in these coalitions, the deployment of Royal Navy vessels, and the conduct of joint UK-US airstrikes against Houthi targets in Yemen. The legal basis for these military actions is examined, with the UK and US invoking the right of self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter and notifying the UN Security Council accordingly. This work discusses as well the role of Parliament in authorizing or scrutinizing military action, noting the evolving convention that the House of

Commons should be consulted before the deployment of armed forces, except in emergencies.

In addition to military responses, the briefing reviews the array of sanctions and arms embargoes imposed by the UN, US, UK, and EU against the Houthis and their supporters. It explains the distinction between different types of terrorist designations and the implications for humanitarian aid and international relations. The document highlights the challenges of enforcing these measures, particularly given the Houthis' ability to source weapons and funding from external allies and the ongoing debate over whether to proscribe the group as a terrorist organization in the UK. The humanitarian and political consequences of the crisis have been addressed as well, including the impact on UN-mediated peace talks in Yemen and the risks to civilian populations. It notes the concerns of aid organizations about the suspension of operations in areas affected by hostilities and the broader implications for regional stability. The analysis draws on a wide range of sources, including official statements, UN documents, media reports, and expert commentary, to provide a balanced and nuanced assessment of the situation.

A notable strength of the briefing is its synthesis of empirical data and qualitative analysis, which offers insights into the motivations behind the Houthis' actions and the effectiveness of international countermeasures. The document highlights the group's pragmatic use of maritime aggression to consolidate domestic power, project influence regionally, and signal solidarity with Iran's "axis of resistance." It also examines the limitations of military and economic pressure in

deterring the Houthis, noting their resilience, adaptability, and ability to exploit divisions within the international community.

By placing the Red Sea crisis within the larger context of west Asian geopolitics and global trade, the House of Commons Library briefing offers a useful framework for comprehending the complex interactions of state and non-state actors in modern conflict. Its unbiased, evidence-driven approach establishes it as an authoritative resource for researchers, policymakers, and anyone trying to grasp the changing motivations and strategies of the Houthis, along with the challenges they present to regional dominance and international security.

While existing studies provide important insights into the Houthis' motivations and the impact of their Red Sea attacks, the literature remains limited in several critical respects. Most analyses focus on external drivers, such as Iranian support or regional proxy dynamics, or emphasize the immediate economic and security consequences of maritime disruptions. However, there is a lack of comprehensive research that systematically examines the internal dynamics of the Houthi movement, including factional decision-making, evolving tactical innovations, and the interplay between ideological narratives and pragmatic interests. This gap is significant because understanding the Houthis' internal motivations and strategic evolution is essential for developing more effective theoretical frameworks in international relations and for informing policy responses that address the root causes of regional instability, rather than merely reacting to surface-level events. By addressing these overlooked aspects, this research aims to contribute both to academic theory and to practical policy debates on non-state actors and asymmetric maritime conflict.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

This research employs Robert W. Cox's critical theory framework from *Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations* (1981) to analyze contemporary global transformations. Unlike conventional problem-solving theories that operate within fixed institutional frameworks and treat power structures as permanent, critical theory *"does not take institutions and social power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing."*[20] Cox's framework provides a historically grounded and dialectical approach that understands social and political complexes as dynamic wholes, revealing how material conditions, ideas, and institutions interact to shape social forces and transform world orders.

1.7.1 Historical Structures: The Triad of Forces

Cox's conceptualization of historical structures centers on the interaction of three key forces: ideas, material capabilities, and institutions. This triadic framework explains the formation, reproduction, and transformation of social and political orders.

1. Ideas

"Ideas are not epiphenomenal or reflections of material conditions; rather, they actively shape what actors perceive as possible and legitimate within global politics." According to Robert W. Cox, ideas encompass ideologies, identities, and collective images that guide state behavior, social forces, and world order construction. Ideas influence actors' interpretation of interests and legitimize power relations, deeply

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[20] Cox, R. W. (1981). *Social Forces, States and World Orders*. Millennium, 10(2), 126–155.

embedded in cultural and historical contexts. For example, collective images represent coherent worldviews held by specific groups, affecting negotiation and conflict dynamics. [21] He believes ideas are active components that interplay with material power and institutions, forming social and political structures. Cox critiques the strict separation of ideas from material power found in some realist and neo-Marxist theories, contending that ideas are integrally linked to the production relations and power dynamics that shape social forces. Moreover, ideas evolve historically, contributing to shifts in world order by shaping how actors understand and pursue their interests.

2. Material capabilities

Material capabilities refer to the technological, economic, and organizational resources that enable actors to exert power and influence. Unlike Neo-realism, which traditionally regards material power as static, Cox emphasizes their dynamic and historically contingent nature; they are shaped by social forces, production relations, and human agency.

Material capabilities serve as both constraints and enablers of social action and institutional transformation. Their evolution, such as technological advances or economic strength changes, drives shifts in world order and shapes state capacities to project power and implement strategies.

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[21] Cox, R. W. (1981). Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10(2), 126–155. https://doi.org/10.1177/030582988101000201

3. Institutions

Institutions are formal and informal structures—such as laws, political organizations, and international norms- that stabilize prevailing power relations and shape social consciousness. Cox stresses that institutions are not passive frameworks; they actively uphold or challenge material power and ideas, contributing to conflict resolution and maintaining or transforming social order.

Institutions embody dominant ideologies and material interests but also represent potential sites of resistance and change when contested by emergent forces or alternative visions. Understanding institutions as both stabilizers and transformers of social relations is crucial to grasping how continuity and change occur in world orders.

1.7.2 Dialectical Change: Hegemony vs. Counter-Hegemony

1. Hegemony

Following Gramsci, Cox conceptualizes hegemony as a social order maintained through broadly based consent anchored in ideology and institutions, rather than solely by coercion. Hegemony involves the legitimate dominance of social classes or power blocs over subordinate groups, achieved by embedding authority within societal norms, values, and organizational frameworks.

Consensual acceptance of hegemony enables political stability and the smooth operation of economic and social relations. An example cited is the Pax Americana, which relies on a mixture of consent, institutions, ideology, and occasional coercion to sustain U.S.-led global dominance.

2. Counter-hegemony

Counter-hegemony refers to efforts by subordinate or alternative social forces to contest the dominant order by constructing rival ideologies, mobilizing social groups, and building new institutions. These challenges arise within historical contradictions and crises and may evolve into coherent visions for alternative world orders.

Counter-hegemonic actors employ strategies that disrupt the legitimacy and functioning of existing hegemonies, aiming to reshape power relations in ways that better represent their interests and values.

1.7.3 Strategy in Robert Cox's Critical Theory

In Cox's framework, strategy is a purposive, historically informed practice by which social forces seek to contest, transform, or sustain hegemonic power through the dynamic interaction of ideas, material capabilities, and institutions. It involves exposing the historical origins and contradictions of existing power relations and institutions to enable transformative structural change. Strategy is both analytical and practical, aiming to reshape power relations by mobilizing social forces, exercising ideological leadership, building coalitions, articulating alternative ideas, and establishing counter-institutions that challenge hegemonic consent and legitimacy.

Drawing from Gramsci, Cox's concept of strategy includes a combination of coercion and consent, blending political, ideological, and coercive tools. This multilayered approach transcends mere force to maintain or challenge dominance. Strategy also requires critical reflexivity, awareness of the social and historical embeddedness of ideas, power, and institutions, which allows actors to identify

32

opportunities for emancipation and social change within prevailing historical structures.

Within this theoretical framework, the Gramscian concepts of war of position and war of movement can be integrated to clarify how strategy is enacted. The war of position corresponds to the protracted struggle in ideological, institutional, and social arenas where counter-hegemonic forces build legitimacy and social consent by constructing alternative ideas, norms, and institutions, thereby eroding the dominant hegemony's legitimacy. Conversely, the war of movement involves direct, coercive, and rapid action, often military or forceful offensives, that physically challenge and destabilize existing power structures.

Together, these two forms of struggle represent complementary dimensions of strategy in Cox's framework: the war of position lays the ideological-institutional groundwork necessary for sustainable change, while the war of movement seeks to seize control through forceful disruption and transformation of hegemonic power. An effective strategy combines both, navigating the triadic forces (ideas, material power, institutions) in a dialectical manner to advance counter-hegemonic objectives.

1.8 Research Methodology

1.8.1 Research Design

A qualitative, descriptive-analytical design will be used to examine the maritime strategy of the Houthis as a counter-hegemony to the existing regional hegemony in the West Asia region (2023–2024). This method is well-suited to international relations research, as it allows for in-depth exploration of complex political, ideological, and operational dynamics using non-numerical data such as

33

documents, reports, and media analysis. This approach will offer nuanced insights into the Houthis' actions and their broader impact on regional and global security by providing a detailed narrative and critical analysis.

1.8.2 Research limits

The research focuses on the period of late 2023, exactly after the October 7th attacks, to the end of 2024, which is marked as the onset of intensified Houthis' attacks. Furthermore, the scope of the study is limited to the Red Sea region, particularly maritime routes affected by Houthi operations. This analysis centers strategy held by the Houthis, rather than the broader Yemen conflict or other regional actors unless directly relevant. Finally, this limitation aims to address the specific research question with maximal evidence.

1.8.3 Units and level of analysis

Determining the unit of analysis is crucial for guiding data collection and analysis to address the research problem and draw valid conclusions effectively. The unit of analysis refers to the primary entity or focus under study. In this study, the unit of analysis is primarily the Houthis, specifically their actions and attacks in the Red Sea region.[22]

The unit of explanation, often analogous to the independent variable, is the factor or object that influences or explains the behavior of the unit of analysis in research.[23] Here, the unit of explanation pertains to the global and regional context

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[22] Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
[23] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 100.

that led to the emergence of non-state actors such as Houthis. These two concepts, the unit of analysis and the unit of explanation, are interconnected, as the global and regional context (unit of explanation) directly impacts the actions and outcomes observed in the Houthis (unit of analysis). Additionally, the level of analysis defines the scale or scope at which the international system is observed, such as individuals, groups, states, groups of states, or the international system. In this study, the level of analysis is at the global level, as it examines the Houthis' actions within the broader context of international relations and global power dynamics.

1.8.4 Data Collection Technique

Data collection is the systematic process of gathering information from relevant sources to address the research question. In this study, secondary data will be collected from a variety of reliable and pertinent sources, with clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and credibility of the information. The focus is on data related directly to the Houthis' maritime campaign in the Red Sea during 2023–2024.[24] The key sources include:

1. Academic journal articles (peer-reviewed studies focusing on Houthi ideology, maritime tactics, regional hegemonies, and asymmetric warfare),

2. Official government and international organization reports (such as those from the United Nations, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), and the UK House of Commons),

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[24] "Research Methods in International Relations," SAGE, accessed June 13, 2025, https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/120704_book_item_120704.pdf.

3. Reputable international media outlets (e.g., Al Jazeera, BBC, Reuters),

4. Industry publications and think tank analyses related to maritime security and geopolitical dynamics.

To systematically identify relevant sources, the following keywords and search terms were used: Houthis maritime strategy, Houthis Red Sea attacks, Houthi counter-hegemony, asymmetric warfare Red Sea, regional hegemony West Asia, Houthi missile capabilities, Red Sea shipping disruption, maritime security Yemen conflict, Iran-backed non-state actors, and international response to Houthi attacks.

Approximately 150 to 200 documents and reports were initially gathered during the data collection phase. After applying inclusion criteria such as direct relevance to the topic, currency (publications mainly from 2023–2025), authoritative authorship, and methodological rigor, the dataset was refined to about 75 high-quality documents selected for deep analysis.

The data reduction process involved thematic coding and content filtering to refine the collected materials. This included removing duplicate and irrelevant content, grouping documents according to key thematic areas such as material capabilities, ideological framing, and institutional impacts, and focusing on texts that provided detailed empirical evidence or authoritative insights into the strategic evolution of the Houthis. Further, to ensure credibility and reduce bias, rigorous source triangulation was applied. This involved cross-verifying information by comparing perspectives from four primary categories: academic studies, including peer-reviewed articles on Houthi ideology and strategy; official reports like UN documents, IISS analyses, and

governmental briefings; international media coverage from outlets such as Al Jazeera, BBC, and Reuters; and publications from industry and think tanks specializing in maritime security and geopolitical developments. Finally, by systematically contrasting the Houthis' claims of resistance with empirical data on weapon origins, operational tactics, and regional responses, the research identified inconsistencies and developed a comprehensive, multi-dimensional understanding of their strategy. This approach prevented any single source or viewpoint from dominating the analysis, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of the conclusions.

1.8.5 Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis involves the systematic organization, interpretation, and extraction of meaningful insights from the collected secondary sources. This research will employ a combined thematic and content analysis approach structured explicitly around Robert Cox's Historical Structure Analysis (HSA) framework. This critical theoretical framework directs attention to the triadic forces of ideas, material capabilities, and institutions, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of how the Houthis' maritime strategies in the Red Sea challenge regional hegemony. The analysis will systematically code and interpret data with particular focus on:

1. The ideological narratives constructed by the Houthis and how these articulate counter-hegemonic ideas opposing dominant regional and global powers.

2. The evolution and operational deployment of military capabilities, including detailed operational timeline mapping of weapon systems, targeting patterns, and geographical shifts based on Houthi claims, naval reports, and databases like ACLED and IISS.

3. The Houthis' interactions with, responses to, and impacts upon regional and international institutions, including diplomatic, legal, and military governance frameworks.

This Coxian approach enables a dialectical interpretation of strategic adaptations over time, linking material actions to shifting ideas and institutional engagements. To elucidate distinctive counter-hegemonic tactics, the research will conduct comparative analyses contrasting Houthi maritime operations with other asymmetric maritime actors such as Somali pirates' ransom-focused hijackings and Hezbollah's coastal warfare. Throughout the analysis, a critical assessment of language, framing, and source biases will be conducted with sensitivity to the socio-political contexts of the data's production. This ensures uncovering the underlying power relations and ideological contestations shaping the narratives and reported events.

Source triangulation will be rigorously applied by cross-verifying findings across diverse categories of sources, including academic literature, official documents, and media reporting, to enhance the credibility and reliability of conclusions. Therefore, a transparent audit trail documenting coding decisions, triangulation steps, and analytical procedures will be maintained, ensuring replicability and scholarly scrutiny consistent with the principles of Cox's critical theory.

This integrated analytical framework situates the Houthis' maritime campaign firmly within a broader socio-historical and political-economic context, capturing the unfolding dynamic contestation of hegemony in the Red Sea region.

1.9 Writing Format

CHAPTER I   INTRODUCTION

This first chapter contains an explanation of the research background of the study, problem statement, research question, research objectives, research benefits, literature review from previous similar research on the topic, conceptual framework to analyze the issue, and research methodology, including research design, research limits, units and level of analysis, data collection technique, and data analysis technique.

CHAPTER II   HISTORICAL STRUCTURE OF THE WORLD ORDER AND THE DYNAMICS OF GLOBAL AND REGIONAL HEGEMONY AS THE CONTEXT OF THE RISING OF THE HOUTHI MOVEMENTS

This chapter provides the historical structure of the world order and the shifting dynamics of global and regional hegemony, situating these as the broader context for the emergence and actions of the Houthi movement in the Red Sea during 2023–2024. It explores the underlying reasons for the Houthis' rise, examining the motivations" why," mechanisms "how", and objectives "for what purpose" behind their strategies. Special emphasis is placed on understanding the interplay between the Houthis' ideological and political foundations and the broader regional and global power structures, particularly how hegemony (the rules), both as domination and contestation, shapes the movement's trajectory and its challenge to established authorities.

CHAPTER III   HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE HOUTHI MOVEMENT, REGIONAL CONTEXT, AND ESCALATION OF MARITIME OPERATIONS

This chapter traces the transformation of the Houthi movement from a Zaydi revivalist group in northern Yemen into a powerful political and military actor. It details their ideological roots, rise to prominence, control of key cities like Sanaa and strategic ports, and the complex alliances and tribal dynamics within Yemen. The chapter then focuses on the escalation of Houthi maritime operations in the Red Sea, beginning with the aftermath of the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023. It explains how the Houthis' attacks evolved from targeting Israeli-linked ships to vessels from many nations, using advanced weaponry such as drones and missiles. The chapter also analyzes the responses from regional and international actors, including the formation of naval coalitions and the legal and political rationale for military interventions led by the US, UK, and others.

CHAPTER IV   STRATEGIC LOGIC AND GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE HOUTHI RED SEA CAMPAIGN

This chapter examines the strategic logic behind the Houthis' maritime campaign in the Red Sea, analyzing how internal Yemeni dynamics, factionalism, and external alliances, particularly with Iran, shape their operational choices. It assesses the far-reaching global consequences of Houthi attacks on maritime trade, security, and regional stability, including disruptions to shipping routes, economic costs, and humanitarian impacts. The chapter also critically evaluates the international community's response, military, diplomatic, and legal, highlighting both efforts and

limitations of actors such as the US, UK, EU, and the UN. By situating these developments within the evolving nature of asymmetric maritime threats, the analysis underscores the complex challenges posed to international law, freedom of navigation, and regional governance frameworks.

CHAPTER V   CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Consolidates the research findings by summarizing the findings behind the Houthis' Red Sea attacks and their global impact, including the significant disruption to maritime trade, surge in shipping costs, and rerouting of major traffic routes. The chapter highlights the Houthis' challenge to regional hegemony and the vulnerability of critical maritime chokepoints, drawing on empirical data and authoritative sources. It then presents actionable policy recommendations for the international community, such as strengthening multinational maritime security cooperation and promoting regional dialogue to address root causes, while emphasizing the need for adaptive, multilateral approaches to ensure sustainable maritime safety and regional stability. The chapter also discusses the long-term implications of continued Houthi aggression for global trade and regional stability, and concludes by suggesting directions for future research to further analyze the internal dynamics of the Houthi movement and the effectiveness of new security frameworks in countering asymmetric threats at sea.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL STRUCTURE OF THE WORLD ORDER AND THE DYNAMICS OF GLOBAL AND REGIONAL HEGEMONY AS THE CONTEXT OF THE RISING OF THE HOUTHI MOVEMENTS

This chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical structure of the world order and the shifting dynamics of regional hegemony that form the essential backdrop for the rise and strategic actions of the Houthis in the Red Sea during 2023–2024. The chapter clarifies how global and regional power configurations influence local non-state actors and their strategic choices by situating the movement within these broader structural contexts.[25]

Analyzing world order and regional hegemony is crucial because it connects macro-level systemic transformations to micro-level emergent phenomena such as the Houthis' maritime strategies. It helps explain not just the immediate tactical developments but also the underlying power relations, norms, and contestations that frame and constrain such strategies. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how peripheral actors challenge established authorities by exploiting structural shifts and contesting hegemonic rules.[26]

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[25] Michael Cox, *Global Political Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 45.

[26] Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 129.

2.1 The World Order: Shifting Global Power Structures

2.1.1 The Post-World War II Order (1945–1991)

After 1945, the international system became defined by bipolarity: two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, dominated global affairs. This era, known as the Cold War, was marked by a unique world order. For the first time, two superpowers on different continents viewed their competition as a global contest, extending their ideological and strategic rivalries worldwide. While regional variations existed, Europe and East Asia were core theaters, with Africa more on the fringe. The U.S.-Soviet confrontation became the prevailing lens through which political developments were interpreted nearly everywhere.[27]

The aftermath of World War II drastically reduced the number of "really important players" on the world stage. The term superpower emerged to distinguish the overwhelming power of the U.S. and USSR from other "ordinary" great powers like the UK, France, and later, re-emergent Germany and Japan. Despite the presence of other significant states, analyses almost universally agreed that the Cold War world was essentially bipolar: two dominant actors overshadowed all others in military, nuclear, and ideological terms.[28]

A defining characteristic of this period was profound ideological polarization. The system's polarity was not just about material capabilities, but also about conflicting ideas and systems for organizing society, economics, and even culture. The

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[27] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 19–22.
[28] Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 3–6.

nuclear arms race was central: by 1985, the Soviet Union and the United States each possessed tens of thousands of nuclear warheads, with other countries' arsenals (France, Britain, China) much smaller by comparison. This led to a system of deterrence that heavily influenced strategic relations and gave the military rivalry a nuclear dimension at its core.[29]

While the U.S.–Soviet rivalry shaped global affairs, much of its impact in the developing world was manifested through proxy conflicts. Decolonization, the process of former colonies gaining independence, expanded the number of states dramatically, from 51 UN members in 1945 to 192 in 2006. Many of these new, often weaker, states became arenas for superpower competition rather than independent actors in their own right.

The two blocs backed opposing sides in conflicts across West Asia and Africa. The U.S. built a global alliance system (including NATO, SEATO, CENTO, and bilateral agreements), while the Soviet alliances were more Eurasian-centric (Warsaw Pact, treaties with China, Vietnam, North Korea). These alliances were not just military pacts but also reflected deep-seated ideological divides, often creating long-lasting clusters of economic and social systems.[30]

In the post-colonial world, while some nations did align with one bloc or the other, sometimes changing sides due to shifting local dynamics, others sought to avoid

[29] Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 128–30.
[30] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20–25.

direct involvement in the superpower confrontation, finding themselves trapped in the crossfire or forced to accept superpower patronage for aid or survival. Proxy wars led to devastating long-term consequences for developing countries, as seen in places like West Asia, where local rivalries were overlaid with Cold War geopolitics.

Amid this polarization, some newly independent countries deliberately sought a third path. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) emerged as a coalition of states refusing to formally align with either the Western or Eastern blocs. India was a central figure, remaining a leader within the movement. However, the NAM's effectiveness was inherently limited: the global environment exerted substantial pressure on states to choose sides, and "non-alignment" often proved difficult to maintain in practice, especially during crises or wars. For example, India signed a treaty with the USSR in 1971 due to tensions with Pakistan and China, but this did not make it a member of the Soviet bloc.[31]

Moreover, the NAM could not offer the same kinds of security guarantees or economic support as the superpower blocs, and its influence was often more symbolic than practical. While it did provide a platform for advocating developing world interests (especially in the United Nations), the reality of superpower rivalry meant that non-aligned states remained vulnerable to external pressures and proxy interventions.

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[31] J. W. Esherick and D. McCormick, *The Non-Aligned Movement: The Beginning of Global Protests* (London: Routledge, 2019), 87–90.

2.1.2 The Post-Cold War Era and the "Unipolar Moment" (1991-2000s):

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the global system transitioned from the bipolarity of the Cold War to what Charles Krauthammer famously termed the "unipolar moment."[32] The United States emerged as the world's sole superpower, possessing unparalleled political, economic, and military influence. Krauthammer argued that US power rested not only on overwhelming military capabilities, including defense spending that exceeded that of the next twenty countries combined, but also on economic pre-eminence and political leadership within Western alliances. This period saw the United States act as the central architect of international security, with Western allies often following its lead in major global and regional decisions, exemplified by the reflagging of Kuwaiti vessels and Operation Desert Storm.[33]

Despite this dominance, the notion of US unipolarity was debated. Some theorists predicted a swift return to multipolarity or the rise of non-Western civilizations as new poles of power, but during the 1990s and early 2000s, no single state challenged America's global supremacy comprehensively.[34]

The "unipolar moment" coincided with the acceleration of globalization, characterized by economic liberalization, increased international interconnectedness, and the technological boom. This period witnessed a dramatic increase in free trade, the expansion of multinational corporations, and the integration of capital markets.

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[32] Oezel, Yasemin. *The Impact of the "Unipolar Moment" on US Foreign Policies in the Mid-East.* SOAS, University of London, February 2014.

[33] Charles Krauthammer, *The Unipolar Moment* (Foreign Affairs, 1990), 23–35.

[34] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 381–389.

Global institutions and frameworks (such as the World Trade Organization) sought to promote economic openness and cooperation.

However, the era's globalization also produced significant discontent. Economic liberalization led to uneven growth, fostering stark inequalities within and between countries. Many developing nations struggled with the effects of rapid market reforms, job losses, and the weakening of local industries. The rise of non-state actors, ranging from multinational corporations to "terrorist networks," challenged state-centric notions of power, further complicating the unipolar structure. While the US remained the chief orchestrator of global economic and political frameworks, its ability to unilaterally shape outcomes was increasingly constrained by the complex interdependencies of a globalized system.[35]

2.1.3 Shifting Global Power Dynamics (2000s-Present):

Since the early 2000s, the international system has undergone a significant transformation marked by the rise of new powers, notably China and Russia, along with other emerging economies such as India, Brazil, and Indonesia. China's remarkable economic growth, technological advancements, and expanding military capabilities have elevated it as a peer competitor to the United States, disrupting the previously uncontested US unipolar dominance. Russia, despite economic sanctions and the costs of military engagements like the war in Ukraine, continues to wield considerable regional military power and leverages strategic partnerships with China and other countries to assert itself on the global stage. Moreover, economic blocs such

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[35] Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 50–75.

as BRICS and coalitions like the G77 reflect the growing solidarity and influence of the Global South, further challenging Western hegemony and contributing to a complex multipolar world order.[36]

The renewed era of great power rivalry is vividly manifested in regional conflicts and strategic contests, thereby complicating global security dynamics. Russia's military interventions in Ukraine and territorial assertions in Crimea and Donbas underscore its efforts to resist NATO's eastward expansion and reclaim regional influence. Simultaneously, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and its Belt and Road Initiative signal ambitions to expand economic and geopolitical footholds across Eurasia and beyond. These developments have intensified competition in regions from Eastern Europe to Asia-Pacific, making cooperation more fraught and increasing the potential for broader geopolitical confrontations. Alliances such as NATO, QUAD, and AUKUS represent strategic attempts by Western powers to counterbalance the China-Russia axis. Still, these measures also illustrate the fragmented and contested nature of the regional and global order today.[37]

Alongside shifting power centers is an erosion of the international norms and multilateral institutions that have traditionally underpinned global governance. The principles of sovereignty, non-intervention, and rule-based order face unprecedented challenges as nationalism rises and states increasingly assert unilateral policies. Major powers, including the US, China, and Russia, pursue differing interpretations of

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[36] Michael A. Peters, "The emerging multipolar world order: A preliminary analysis," Educational Philosophy and Theory 55, no. 14 (2023): 1653–1663.
[37] Peters, "The emerging multipolar world order," 1656–1658.

international law, which has weakened the authority of organizations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Criminal Court. Furthermore, emerging multipolarity complicates consensus-building on critical global issues like climate change, security, and economic regulation, as competing visions for global governance collide. This normative erosion threatens the effectiveness and legitimacy of multilateralism in managing complex transnational challenges.[38]

2.2 Dynamics of Hegemony in the West Asia Region

2.2.1 Historical Evolution of Regional Power Structures

The contemporary political landscape of the Region is shaped by the legacies of colonialism, where post-World War I European mandates demarcated artificial borders that grouped diverse ethnic and sectarian communities into fragmented states. This complex mosaic of Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Persians, Sunnis, Shias, and Christians within single national entities has been a perennial challenge for state-building and political cohesion, often igniting internal conflicts and complicating regional governance dynamics.[39] This foundational fragmentation sowed the seeds for later ideological and political movements vying to unify or control the region.

One such movement was Pan-Arabism, which emerged most prominently under Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the mid-20th century. Pan-Arabism championed Arab nationalism and sought to forge political unity across Arab states as

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[38] Peters, "The emerging multipolar world order," 1660–1663.
[39] Number Analytics, "Colonial Legacy in the Middle East," June 17, 2025, https://www.numberanalytics.com/blog/colonial-legacy-middle-east-imperialism.

a bulwark against imperialism and Western domination. However, the movement's momentum declined sharply after military defeats, most notably the 1967 Six-Day War, and due to diverging national interests among Arab states. [40] The decline of Pan-Arabism opened space for alternative power centers to emerge, particularly Islamist movements, which redefined political authority through religious identity.

In this ideological vacuum, Islamist movements rose sharply in prominence as influential political actors. Sunni Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood advocated for socio-political systems grounded in Islamic principles, while Shia political Islam found institutionalization in Iran following the 1979 revolution.[41] These movements not only contested established secular governments but also provided frameworks for mobilizing communities along religious lines, deeply impacting the evolving regional power structure.

2.2.2 Key Regional Actors and Their Spheres of Influence

Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia has risen to prominence as the foremost conservative Sunni power in West Asia. Leveraging its vast oil wealth and custodianship of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, Riyadh wields significant diplomatic, economic, and ideological influence, particularly within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Saudi Arabia's strategy emphasizes consolidating Sunni leadership and counterbalancing regional rivals, chiefly Iran, to maintain its

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[40] Fawaz A. Gerges, *Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash That Shaped the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 112–135.
[41] Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 45–70.

preeminent position as a U.S. partner and as a central actor in regional politics. Riyadh's influence extends through ambitious economic investments, promotion of Wahhabi religious ideology, orchestrated political alliances, and military interventions, such as those in Yemen. These efforts underscore Saudi Arabia's intention to shape the regional order and protect its geopolitical and religious interests in a shifting West Asia and North Africa landscape.[42]

Conversely, Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution heralded the rise of a revolutionary Shia Islamist model designed to export its political ideology across the region. Tehran's "Axis of Resistance," which includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, and Shia militias in Iraq and Yemen, functions as an extensive network of proxies counterbalancing both Saudi and Western influence. Through these alliances and political patronage, Iran has substantially reconfigured the West Asia's military and strategic balance, projecting power beyond its borders. Iran's activism leverages sectarian identities and opportunistic engagement in regional conflicts, challenging the traditional Sunni predominance and complicating pathways to regional stability. This strategic endurance illustrates Iran's goal of asserting itself as a regional hegemon despite international sanctions and diplomatic isolation.[43]

Other influential regional players further complicate west Asia geopolitics. Turkey leverages its Ottoman heritage and growing economic might to pursue neo-Ottoman ambitions, expanding its influence through military interventions in Syria

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[42] Library of Congress, The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security, October 2023, https://www.loc.gov/item/2023692768/.

[43] Gulf Research Center, Saudi-Iranian Relations: Regional Implications, accessed August 2025, https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/38.

and Libya, as well as diplomatic and economic outreach across the Levant and North Africa. Ankara's foreign policy combines hard power with soft power instruments aimed at restoring regional stature and influence. Egypt continues its traditional leadership role, anchored by its demographic weight and formidable military, focusing on maintaining stability in its immediate neighborhood, including the Red Sea and Horn of Africa regions. Meanwhile, Israel remains a preeminent military-technological power, concentrating on existential security threats and expanding diplomatic normalization, most notably through the Abraham Accords, with certain Arab states. This constellation of actors fosters a highly competitive, multi-polar, and agile regional order defined by shifting alliances, rivalries, and the ongoing contestation of influence.[44]

2.2.3 The Saudi-Iran Rivalry and Its Manifestations

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is deeply rooted in both ideological and sectarian differences, predominantly characterized by Saudi Arabia's espousal of Sunni Wahhabi conservatism and Iran's promotion of Shia revolutionary ideology. This clash of religious identities is not merely theological but serves as a foundation for their broader political and regional ambitions. The 1979 Iranian Revolution marked a significant turning point, posing a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy and intensifying sectarian polarization throughout West Asia. This ideological contest fuels the sectarian divide, legitimizing aggressive competition for

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[44] homas McMullan, "Saudi-Iran Rapprochement Signals Shifting Regional Power Dynamics in the Middle East," Australian Outlook, June 13, 2025.https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/saudi-iran-rapprochement-signals-shifting-regional-power-dynamics-in-the-middle-east/.

influence and power across the region and shaping domestic and foreign policies aligned with sectarian identities. The rivalry transcends religion, becoming a complex geopolitical struggle with historical roots and ongoing regional implications.[45]

This Saudi-Iran rivalry primarily unfolds through a series of proxy conflicts in key west Asia countries, including Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. Each of these arenas has witnessed violent clashes between Saudi-backed Sunni factions and Iranian-supported Shia militias, contributing to prolonged instability and devastating humanitarian crises. Proxy warfare allows both nations to exert influence and pursue strategic objectives while avoiding direct military confrontation, thus perpetuating fragmented political landscapes and weakening state institutions. Control over these proxy battlefields enables them to project power without overt war, reflecting a broader strategic calculation that relies on local actors to serve as extensions of their regional ambitions.[46]

Beyond sectarian and military competition, economic and geopolitical factors deeply enhance the intensity of the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Both countries vie for control of critical resources and strategic geographical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab El-Mandeb, vital for global energy supplies and maritime trade routes. The competition also extends to influencing regional alliances, shaping trade, investment flows, and diplomatic relations to reinforce their spheres of influence. This multifaceted rivalry influences global energy markets and international security

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[45] Michael Knights, *The Evolution of the Houthi Movement: From Local Rebellion to Regional Power* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018), 22-29.
[46] Boghani, Shaheryar M. "Iran's Proxy War in Syria: Support for Assad's Regime." *Middle East Journal of Conflict Studies* 12, no. 3 (2020): 45-47.

dynamics, as both states leverage their economic capabilities and territorial advantages to assert dominance and contain one another's regional ambitions, often exacerbating tensions through strategic alliances and economic measures.[47]

2.3 The Rise of The Houthis: Contextual Factors

2.3.1 Internal Yemeni Factors

Following the 1962 Republican Revolution in Yemen, which overthrew the Zaydi imamate, the Zaydi community experienced profound political and religious marginalization under successive Republican governments. This marginalization is critical to understanding the rise of the Houthi movement, a notable Zaydi insurgency in northern Yemen.

The Republican state sought to reduce the influence of Zaydism by promoting a nationalist ideology underpinned largely by Sunni Traditionalism. Republican leaders deliberately attenuated the influence of Zaydi institutions and religious figures, while encouraging the assimilation of Zaydis into Sunni religious reforms. This process saw the spread of Wahhabi and Salafi doctrines into Zaydi regions, fostering socioreligious tensions. The transformation of education and religious curricula to reflect Sunni Traditionalism deepened the erosion of Zaydi theological and political dominance in its historic northern strongholds.[48]

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[47] Adel Bakawan, *Yemen's Protracted Conflict: The Failure of Regional Coordination* (Doha: Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2019), 30-34.

[48] طريق الإسلام. "التعريف بجماعة الحوثي ونشأتهم - جماعة الحوثي (تنظيم الشباب المؤمن / أنصار الله)(1)." Last modified April 19, 2015. Accessed August 13, 2025. https://ar.islamway.net/article/47200/-1-التعريف-بجماعة-الحوثي-ونشأتهم.

Zaydis were subjected to social and political stigmatization, with their doctrines and activism often portrayed as sectarian or subversive. A "good Zaydi-bad Zaydi" paradigm arose, categorizing those who conformed to Republican Sunni-influenced norms as "good," while portraying those advocating for a revival of Zaydi doctrine or political activism as "bad" and a threat to the state. This divisive typology constrained the political space for Zaydi identity and fostered internal community fissures.[49]

Additionally, socio-economic grievances and the failure of Yemeni state governance created fertile ground for the Houthis' political mobilization and territorial expansion. Since the early 1990s, the Houthis have positioned themselves as opponents of both political exclusion and the growing influence of Salafi Sunni groups, emphasizing resistance to marginalization and neglect from the central government. Yemen's fragile state infrastructure, compounded by fractured authority and ineffective governance, culminated in a collapse of national cohesion that became starkly visible after the Houthis seized the capital, Sana'a, in 2014. The government's inability to inclusively address regional and tribal grievances, coupled with widespread economic hardship and political instability, enabled the Houthis to consolidate power and provided the conditions for sustained conflict. Thus, the Houthis' rise is as much a consequence of lingering socio-political exclusion as it is of broader state failure and fragmentation.

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[49] المركز العربي لدراسات التطرف. "أنصار الله الحوثيون" Accessed August 13, 2025. https://thearabcenter.org/أنصار-الله-الحوثيون.

2.3.2 Regional Factors

The rise of the Houthi movement is deeply embedded in a complex interplay of internal Yemeni dynamics and broader regional and international influences. Originating in the 1990s from the Saada governorate in northern Yemen, the movement emerged primarily as a response to socioeconomic and political marginalization under President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime, which systematically neglected the northern Zaydi Shia community. The Houthis initially operated as a grassroots religious-political movement promoting Zaydi revivalism, gradually evolving through a series of insurgent conflicts with the Yemeni government between 2004 and 2010. The movement's resilience and expansion were facilitated partly by Yemen's fragmented governance and weak state capacity, which created a power vacuum that the Houthis exploited to consolidate territorial control.[50]

Regionally, the Houthis became part of a broader geopolitical contest shaped by increasing Iranian influence in the Arabian Peninsula. Iran's support, political, ideological, and material, is a critical external factor in the Houthis' rise, which provided the movement with enhanced weaponry, including advanced drones and anti-ship missiles that dramatically increased their asymmetric warfare capabilities. This support aligns the Houthis within the so-called "Axis of Resistance," a coalition opposing Saudi, US, and Israeli regional dominance.

The internal Yemeni political upheaval following the Arab Spring further accelerated Houthi ascendancy. The fall of President Saleh in 2011 and the weak

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[50] Maysaa Shuja al Deen, "Radicalization of Zaydi Reform Attempts" (MA thesis, American University in Cairo, 2016), 80-110; Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, "The Houthi Movement from a Local Perspective," 2024.

transitional government of Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi created significant instability. The Houthis were able to seize the opportunity presented by the fragmented political landscape, culminating in their takeover of the capital, Sanaa, in September 2014. Subsequent political maneuvers and military campaigns against their rivals, including the Saudi-backed government forces, entrenched the Houthis as a dominant force in northern Yemen.[51]

The Houthis also benefit from a significant domestic support base, due to their provision of governance and local services in territories under their control, further complicating the international community's approach to the group. This embeddedness contributed to the international reluctance, particularly by some Western and regional powers, to fully designate the Houthis as a terrorist organization, reflecting an institutional dilemma in confronting an influential non-state actor with popular legitimacy.

Finally, the ongoing Gaza conflict and broader Israeli-Palestinian tensions resonate powerfully with the Houthis' ideological narrative. The group frames its military actions, including attacks on maritime targets, as acts of solidarity with Gaza and opposition to Western and Israeli influence, further fueling their asymmetric campaign in the Red Sea and attracting regional sympathy.

2.3.3 External Factors (Global War on Terror)

Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States, under the leadership of President George W. Bush, launched a globally encompassing "War on

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[51] Asher Aviad Orkaby, *The International History of the Yemen Civil War, 1962-1968* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2014), 10-30; also see United States Institute of Peace, "Yemen," accessed August 2025.

Terror" that was characterized by an ambiguous but sweeping targeting of terrorism understood not merely as specific acts of violence, but broadly as a threat emanating from Islamist ideology and political Islam. Bush's administration framed this war as a "holy crusade" against a form of Islam that rejects Western modernity, secularism, and values, in effect equating terrorism with Islam, especially its fundamentalist strands.[52] Prominent American intellectuals and politicians articulated this ideological dimension explicitly: Francis Fukuyama described the conflict as a war against Islamic fundamentalism, stating that the eventual goal was to bring Islamic societies to accept Western secularism and modernity along lines similar to the Christian doctrine of separating religious from state authority.[53]

Former President Richard Nixon similarly portrayed Islamic fundamentalists as revolutionaries' intent on reviving and imposing Islamic law as both religion and state, positioning them as existential ideological challengers to Western liberal orders. Margaret Thatcher, Bernard Lewis, and Senator Joseph Lieberman echoed these themes, framing the conflict as a civilizational struggle between an "Islamic" worldview rejecting Western values and the liberal capitalist order that sustains global power hierarchies. This ideological war was further reflected in calls by thinkers like Thomas Friedman and Stanley A. Weiss for a socio-political realignment of Muslim

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[52] Khaled Hroub, Hamas: Political Thought and Practice (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000), 97–100.
[53] Francis Fukuyama, "After the War on Terror," Newsweek, December 2001–February 2002, 45–47.

societies toward Western-style secular modernity, as the alternative represented "fundamentalism," antithetical to international stability.[54]

This American ideological framework, while publicly obscured beneath claims of combating terrorism, reveals a deeper struggle for cultural and political hegemony. It frames West Asia, and more broadly the Islamic world, as a theater within which the liberal capitalist order must impose its values as universal, thereby denying alternative models of governance, identity, and sovereignty.[55] The discourse makes clear that the "War on Terror" is a civilizational confrontation over the legitimacy of secular liberalism versus religiously inspired political systems, especially those advocating Islamic governance. This hegemonic ideological project has underpinned the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, where American military superiority was expected to translate into political transformation aimed at embedding Western norms and capitalist economic structures.[56]

Yet, the consequences of this hegemonic project have been ambiguous and destabilizing. The Iraq War, in particular, eroded U.S. credibility and exposed the limitations of military power in engineering political outcomes without local acceptance or regional support. The prolonged conflicts propelled the rise of insurgencies and transnational terrorist networks, and highlighted the growing

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[54] Bassam Haddad, "Global War on Terror and the Middle East," Arab Studies Quarterly 26, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 43–68, accessed August 2025, https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/global-war-terror-middle-east.

[55] Fawaz Gerges, The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 142–160.

[56] Ibid., 148.

multipolarity of global politics, with powers such as Iran and Russia exerting influence in contestation to the U.S.-led order.[57]

Within this ideological and geopolitical context, the Houthi movement in Yemen emerges as a salient counter-hegemonic actor. Rooted in indigenous Zaydi Shi'a traditions and northern Yemeni political grievances, the Houthis have articulated a discourse that stands in direct opposition to both Zionism as the ideological foundation of the Israeli state and Western capitalism as a global economic system sustaining hegemonic dominance. Their slogan, "God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam," encapsulates this opposition, serving as a powerful anti-Western, anti-Zionist ideological platform that rejects the legitimacy of the international order framed by the United States and its allies. Defining their military campaigns as acts of solidarity with the Palestinian people in Gaza and resistance against imperialism, the Houthis reframe classic narratives of maritime security and freedom of navigation, central pillars of hegemonic global trade, as instruments of political and economic domination. Consequently, their attacks in the Red Sea are not merely tactical or military acts; they are symbolic and communicative actions aiming to delegitimize the hegemonic legal frameworks governing international waters and expose contradictions in the claim of universal rights advanced by the established order.[58]

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[57] Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, "Iraq War Damaged US Credibility," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (2011): 4–12.
[58] Arab Center, Washington DC, "Houthi Red Sea Attacks Have Global Economic Repercussions," 2024.

Operationalizing ideology into practice, the Houthis have deliberately targeted maritime vessels in one of the world's most critical sea lanes, the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait, disrupting shipping primarily linked to Israel and its Western allies. This maritime campaign forms part of a broader asymmetric strategy leveraging low-cost but high-impact technology such as anti-ship cruise missiles, suicide drones, and unmanned surface and underwater vessels. Such tactics challenge the material dominance of hegemonic powers by forcing them to expend costly interceptors and conduct persistent naval operations to defend vital maritime corridors, thereby exposing the fragility of the established order's control. Moreover, by presenting their military actions as morally justified resistance rather than outlaw aggression, the Houthis contest the hegemonic narrative of legitimate global governance and security, positioning themselves as defenders of a morally authentic, anti-imperial order.[59]

In sum, the conflict in Yemen and the Red Sea is emblematic of larger ideological struggles inherent in the post-9/11 international system. The hegemonic war on terror, rooted in a civilizational and ideological imposition of Western secular capitalist modernity, confronts indigenous movements like the Houthis, who resist through both discourse and asymmetric warfare aimed at disrupting hegemonic political and economic structures. This confrontation extends beyond battlefield engagements to a battle over legitimacy, sovereignty, and the rules governing the international order, revealing the contested nature of globalization and power projection in the contemporary era.[60]

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[59] Foreign Naval Security Reports, 2025
[60] Journal of Terrorism Studies, "State Sponsored Terrorism as a Tool for Proxy War," 2024.

2.3.3 The Geostrategic Importance of the Red Sea

The Red Sea is one of the most critical maritime corridors globally, linking the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal to the Indian Ocean and serving as a vital artery for international trade, energy shipments, and global supply chains. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, at the southern gateway of the Red Sea, is one of the busiest and most strategically significant chokepoints for maritime traffic, including oil tankers, container ships, and commercial vessels that connect Europe, Asia, and Africa.[61]

The Houthis' territorial control along Yemen's western coast positions them uniquely to exert influence over this crucial maritime route. Through missile and drone attacks, naval interdictions, and declarations of blockades, the Houthis have demonstrated an operational capability to disrupt shipping traffic passing through the Bab el-Mandeb and the broader Red Sea. Their campaign threatens to choke off a significant proportion of global maritime trade, raising the stakes beyond Yemen's borders and attracting international concern.

This leverage enables the Houthis to impose direct economic costs on their adversaries, particularly targeting Israeli-affiliated vessels and shipping supportive of the US and Saudi-led coalition. Their operational choices, including selective targeting, suggest a sophisticated military strategy that integrates geopolitical goals with limited resource expenditure, highlighting their asymmetric tactics.

The Red Sea's geostrategic importance also involves the competing interests of regional and global powers, notably Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt,

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[61] Number Analytics, "The Bab al-Mandab Strait: A Chokepoint of Global Trade," June 21, 2025.

the United States, and China, each seeking to safeguard their commercial and security interests in the maritime domain. The Houthis' capacity to disrupt these routes challenges the hegemonic control these states seek to maintain, complicating the regional security architecture and global maritime governance.[62]

In summary, the Houthis' rise cannot be fully understood without considering the intertwined regional power rivalries, Yemen's internal fragmentation, and the vital geostrategic significance of the Red Sea. Their asymmetric maritime campaign leverages both regional alliances and geo-economic chokepoints, enabling them to punch above their conventional material weight and challenge broader hegemonic powers controlling the region's seas.

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[62] Middle East Policy & Economic Institute, "The Geopolitical Importance of Bab el-Mandeb Strait: A Strategic Gateway to Global Trade," February 21, 2025.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE HOUTHI MOVEMENT, REGIONAL CONTEXT, AND ESCALATION OF MARITIME OPERATIONS

This chapter will provide a comprehensive account of the Houthi movement's transformation from a Zaydi revivalist group into a major political and military force. It will analyze the ideological, political, and tribal factors that propelled its rise and enabled its control of strategic areas in Yemen. The chapter will then detail the critical shift to maritime operations in the Red Sea, beginning in late 2023, examining the evolution of their targeting strategies and the advanced weaponry used. Finally, it will dissect the regional and international responses, including the formation of naval coalitions and the legal justifications for military interventions led by the United States and the United Kingdom.

3.1 The Origins and Transformation of the Houthi

3.1.1 Ideological Roots and Early Formation

The ideological roots of the Houthi movement are deeply embedded in the historical context of Zaydi Shi'ism in northern Yemen. Zaydism traces its origins to Imam Zayd ibn Ali ibn al-Hussein, born in 80 A.H. and recognized as a key Imam within Islam. His legacy is tied to his revolt against the Umayyad caliphate in 122 A.H., which ultimately led to his death. However, Zaydism as a distinct sect did not fully emerge until over a century later, when it first established itself in Tabaristan in

northern Iran before creating its own state in Yemen. Over the centuries, the sect has produced many respected Islamic scholars.[63]

The historical circumstances of Zaydism's emergence are rooted in Imam Zayd's revolutionary ideas. According to researcher Mohammed Azzan, Zaydism is affiliated with Imam Zayd, who advocated for resisting the unjust ruler.[64] Early followers of this principle were initially known as the "companions of the sword" before they were formally called the Zaydi movement.

A central tenet of the Zaidi school of thought is the belief in rebellion against an unjust ruler. While they share the Shiite emphasis on loyalty to the Ahl al-Bayt (the family of the Prophet), they differ from Twelver Shi'a in their approach to the Imamate. Zaydis believe Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib was the most deserving candidate for the Imamate, but they do not reject the caliphates of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, Umar ibn al-Khattab, and Uthman ibn Affan as invalid. Their intellectual and legal framework is similar to that of the Ahl al-Sunnah, relying on the Qur'an, Sunnah, consensus, and analogy. While they respect the works of Sunni scholars like Imams al-Bukhari and Muslim, they do not hold their writings to the same level of adherence as Sunnis do.[65]

Zaydism can be distinguished from other revolutionary movements like the Kharijites. While Kharijites advocated rebellion against any ruler they disagreed with, Zaydism specifically condones rebellion only against a ruler deemed unjust. Although

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[63] Heinz Halm, *Shiites and Shiism: An Introduction*, translated by Allison Brown (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004), 15–20.

[64] Mohammed Azzan, "Origins of the Houthi Supremacist Ideology," *Commonspace*, January 2024, https://www.commonspace.eu/analysis/analysis-origins-houthi-supremacist-ideology.

[65] Farea Al-Muslimi, "Who Are Yemen's Houthis?" Wilson Center, accessed August 2025, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/who-are-yemens-houthis.

there have been some historical shifts, this core difference remains a key distinction between the two movements.[66]

The more immediate incarnation of this Zaydi revivalism emerged in the 1990s after Yemeni unification, with the founding of the "Believing Youth" (Ansar Allah) movement. Established as a socio-religious group aiming to resist perceived encroachments by Saudi-supported Salafi-Wahhabi preachers, the movement focused on educating local youth about Zaydi heritage and countering foreign influence and domestic corruption. Its activities included the establishment of religious clubs, summer camps, and social networks to foster a strong community identity. The movement's foundation was a local reaction against both external ideological threats and the Yemeni government's failure to address the economic and political marginalization of the northern highlands. The leadership of the al-Houthi family, especially Hussein al-Houthi, became emblematic of this revivalist cause.[67]

A defining symbolic feature of the Houthi movement is its slogan: "God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, A Curse Upon the Jews, Victory to Islam." This chant encapsulates the movement's political and religious identity. It signifies staunch anti-imperialism and opposition to Western influence, as well as resistance against traditional regional adversaries such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. Originating in the early 2000s and inspired by revolutionary Islamist movements like Hezbollah, the slogan functions as both a rallying cry and an articulation of the Houthis' worldview.

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[66] R. M. Burrell, "Zaydism and Kharijite Differences," in *The Cambridge History of Islam*, eds. P. M. Holt et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 385–390.

[67] Adam Baron, "How the Houthis Became Shi'a," *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, January 2018, https://merip.org/2018/01/how-the-houthis-became-shia/.

While deeply evocative, some analysts argue that the movement's political ideology remains fluid, often balancing sectarian rhetoric with broader populist and nationalist appeals to maintain wider support.[68]

3.1.2 The Houthi Rebellions (2004-2010)

The armed phase of the Houthis' movement began in 2004 with clashes against the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The conflict escalated following the Yemeni government's crackdown on the movement, culminating in the death of the group's founder, Hussein al-Houthi, in September 2004. His brother, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, succeeded him as the leader, steering the movement through a protracted insurgency. This period of repeated confrontations allowed the Houthis to transform from a marginalized religious revivalist group into a formidable military force. Over these years, the Houthis gained significant local support in northern Yemen, consolidating control over mountainous areas and establishing de facto autonomy.[69]

The ongoing low-intensity conflict during this period enabled the Houthis to expand their organizational and military capabilities. They engaged in intermittent wars with government forces, often exploiting Saleh's political weaknesses and shifting alliances. These confrontations further weakened central state authority in the north and exposed the government's inability to impose control. The Houthis also developed political structures and community networks that bolstered their legitimacy.

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[68] Adam Baron, "Houthi Media: A Study in Ideological Warfare," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 19, 2025, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/22797.

[69] Michael Knights, *The Long Struggle for Yemen's North* (Washington, DC: CNA Analysis & Solutions, 2010), 30–40.

This consolidation laid the groundwork for their later rise to national prominence and military campaigns beyond their traditional hinterland.[70]

3.1.3 The Path to Power (2011-2015)

The Yemeni Revolution of 2011, sparked by the wider Arab Spring uprisings, created a power vacuum that the Houthi movement exploited decisively. Initially part of the broader wave of protests demanding the end of Ali Abdullah Saleh's long authoritarian rule, the Houthis leveraged the instability to bolster their political and military influence. When Saleh was forced to step down in 2012 in favor of his vice president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the Houthis were increasingly dissatisfied with the transitional arrangement, viewing it as exclusionary and favoring their rivals, particularly the Islah party. The transitional government's inability to address Yemen's deep socio-political fissures, coupled with rising popular discontent over economic hardship, provided the Houthis with fertile ground to increase their territorial control in northern Yemen, expand their support base, and strengthen their armed capabilities. This period marked their transition from a marginal rebel faction to a dominant force in Yemeni politics.[71]

The Houthis' growing strength culminated in a bold military campaign in 2014 when they seized the capital, Sanaa, in September. This maneuver was a turning point that dismantled the authority of the internationally recognized government and disrupted the fragile political transition. Their rapid advance was facilitated by

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[70] Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2016), 90–105.
[71] Isa Blumi, *Destroying Yemen: What Chaos in Arabia Tells Us About the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 212–218.

widespread public dissatisfaction with the government, fractured security institutions, and fractured loyalty within the Yemeni military, which partially aligned with the Houthis. Once in control of Sanaa, the Houthis expanded their governance apparatus, controlling key state institutions and significant portions of Yemen's northern and western provinces. Their ability to sustain control over the capital despite internal opposition and external threats demonstrated their consolidation as a primary political actor.[72]

Following the capture of Sanaa, the Houthis formally ousted President Hadi's government in early 2015, forcing Hadi to flee to Aden and later Saudi Arabia. The Houthis dissolved the existing parliament and created the Supreme Political Council to function as the de facto governing authority, marking a clear shift from insurgency to governance. This consolidation was achieved in part by a pragmatic alliance with former President Saleh and his loyalists, who retained influential military and political power despite his earlier fall from office. This alliance provided the Houthis access to additional military expertise, materiel, and political leverage, enabling a swift and more effective advance across the north and beyond. Although the partnership was unstable and later collapsed violently, it underscored how local political dynamics and opportunistic alliances shaped the movement's rapid ascent.[73]

In the wake of their territorial gains and political power, the Houthis presented themselves not merely as a sectarian militia but as a national actor opposing

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[72] Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (Routledge, 2016), 115–130.
[73] Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (RAND Corporation, 2010), 45–60.

corruption, foreign interference, and economic disenfranchisement. Their control of Sanaa and other strategic areas allowed them to consolidate administrative and military authority, integrating local tribal support and reasserting Zaydi identity with broader nationalist overtones. This period also saw the Houthis develop key governance institutions and maintain control over critical infrastructure, demonstrating political ambition beyond mere military conquest. Their success during this phase altered the trajectory of Yemen's civil conflict, setting the stage for a protracted war involving regional and international actors.[74]

However, the rise of the Houthis also intensified regional tensions, prompting Saudi Arabia and its allies to perceive the movement as an Iranian proxy threatening their southern border and regional influence. This perception catalyzed the Saudi-led military intervention beginning in March 2015, which dramatically escalated the conflict into a devastating war. The intervention aimed to roll back Houthi gains and restore the Hadi government, but ultimately failed to dislodge the Houthis, who had by then established deep roots in Yemen's political and military landscape. The Houthis' consolidation of power between 2011 and 2015, facilitated by internal dynamics and external patronage, would prove remarkably resilient against both domestic and foreign opposition.[75]

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[74] Gregory Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia* (Norton, 2013), 125–138.
[75] Michael Knights, "The Long Struggle for Yemen's North," *CNA Analysis & Solutions* (2010), 72–85.

3.2 The Regional Context and the Escalation of the Yemeni Civil War

3.2.1 The Saudi-Led Intervention (2015)

The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen commenced on March 26, 2015, under the codename Operation Decisive Storm. Officially, the campaign aimed to restore the internationally recognized government of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who had been ousted by the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in late 2014. Saudi Arabia perceived the Houthis as a proxy for Iranian expansionism , threatening its southern border and regional influence. The coalition quickly gathered support from eight Arab states, including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, and Morocco, marking one of the largest military coalitions in the region's recent history. Additionally, major Western powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France provided logistical, intelligence, and diplomatic support to the coalition, reflecting the intervention's wider geopolitical scope.[76]

The initial stages of the intervention consisted mainly of intensive aerial bombardment campaigns aimed at degrading Houthi military capacity, including air strikes on weapons depots, missile bases, and key military installations. The coalition also imposed a naval and air blockade purportedly to prevent arms shipments from Iran reaching Houthi forces. This blockade, however, severely restricted the flow of humanitarian aid and essential imports, contributing to one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Despite these efforts, the Houthis rapidly adapted their tactics and retained control over key parts of northern Yemen, including the capital and strategic

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[76] Stig Stenslie, "Decisive Storm: Saudi Arabia's Attack on the Houthis in Yemen," May 2015.

ports. Notably, the intervention failed to achieve a quick military victory, leading to a shift toward a prolonged campaign blending military pressure with efforts to shape Yemen's political landscape.[77]

The war in Yemen evolved into a proxy conflict between the regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran, deepening sectarian and political fault lines across the West Asia. Saudi Arabia positioned its intervention as a defensive necessity to curb Iranian influence symbolized by the Houthis' rise, framing the conflict as a broader Sunni-Shia struggle. Tehran denied direct command over the Houthis but openly supported them politically and materially, supplying sophisticated ballistic missiles, drones, and battlefield training through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This proxy dynamic ensured that Yemen's civil war became inseparable from regional rivalries, complicating peace initiatives and escalating the violence.[78]

After air strikes, the Saudi-led coalition deployed ground forces and allied militias in southern Yemen to counter Houthi advances, notably helping President Hadi re-establish footholds in Aden and parts of the south. The coalition's ground involvement targeted both Houthi forces and military units loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had allied with the Houthis early in the conflict. Despite tactical gains, the coalition faced significant challenges including guerrilla warfare tactics from the Houthis, harsh terrain, and fractured Yemeni loyalties. These conditions prolonged the

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[77] Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (Routledge, 2016), 142–150.
[78] Mansoor Leverett and Christopher Boucek, "Proxy Warfare in Yemen: Iran's Strategic Approach," *Brookings Institution* Report, 2018, 10–20.

conflict, demonstrating the complexity of Yemen's local dynamics and the limitations of conventional military power in achieving decisive control.[79]

Internationally, the intervention drew intense criticism for its human cost and the scale of civilian suffering. The extensive bombing campaigns, combined with blockades and disrupted access to food, medicine, and fuel, precipitated catastrophic humanitarian consequences. Estimates attribute hundreds of thousands of deaths directly or indirectly to the war, most resulting from famine and disease exacerbated by the blockade. Human rights organizations and the United Nations repeatedly called for ceasefires and humanitarian corridors, which were only sporadically honored. The inability of the coalition to restore stable governance underscored the limits of military intervention without political accommodation and the enduring resilience of the Houthis as a socio-political force.[80]

3.2.2 Tribal Dynamics

Understanding the Houthis requires grasping their complex and evolving relationship with Yemen's tribal system, which is a foundational social structure in the country. Yemen's tribes function as parallel systems of governance, operating under customary laws that regulate social, economic, and political matters independently of the formal state apparatus. Originating mainly from the northern Saada region, a historical tribal stronghold, the Houthis have intricately incorporated tribal membership and loyalties into their movement. Rather than remaining a purely

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[79] Michael Knights, *The Long Struggle for Yemen's North* (CNA Analysis & Solutions, 2010), 80–95.
[80] Human Rights Watch, *Yemen: Events of 2019* (HRW, 2020), https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/yemen.

religious militia, the group has fused aspects of tribal identity with its political and religious ideology, effectively becoming "a tribe" themselves in social and functional terms. This hybrid identity has enabled the Houthis to embed themselves deeply within the local social fabric, reinforcing both recruitment and legitimacy among northern Yemen's tribal populations.[81]

The tribal dimension has served as both an asset and a negotiation tool for the Houthis in consolidating power. Initially, the group drew heavily upon the Zaydi Hashemite families, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, who historically enjoyed an elevated, though distinct, status relative to the broader tribal community. These Hashemites form the organizational and leadership core of the Houthis and heavily influence the group's ideology and hierarchy. Although technically outside traditional tribal decision-making systems, these leaders have effectively exercised authority through appointing loyalists or "supervisors" within tribal structures to maintain control and influence. This approach has allowed the Houthis to balance reverence for tribal customs with centralized political control, enabling them to dominate key local power bases while circumventing confrontation with all tribal leaders simultaneously.[82]

However, the Houthis' relationship with Yemen's tribes has not been uniformly cooperative. Powerful tribal confederations such as Hashid, historically led by influential tribal leaders aligned with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and Bakil

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[81] Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, "الحوثيون بين السياسة والقبيلة والمذهب" (Sanaa: Sanaa Center, 2024), 10–18.

[82] Ibid., 19–25.

have at times actively resisted Houthi expansion. The breakdown of the Houthi-Saleh alliance in late 2017 exposed the fragility and volatility of tribal allegiances, with many tribes distancing themselves or opposing the movement. Further complicating relations, the Houthis have at times employed coercive tactics, including disenfranchisement of resistant tribal leaders, arrests, intimidation, and the destruction of property, to maintain their grip on contested areas. These measures have sparked localized tribal rebellions and contributed to the fragmentation of Yemen's conflict landscape, underscoring the volatile and contentious nature of tribal politics under wartime conditions.[83]

In addition to direct tribal negotiations, the Houthis have leveraged Yemen's historical inter-tribal rivalries through a deliberate divide-and-rule strategy. By exploiting longstanding feuds, economic grievances, and political fractures among competing tribes, they have prevented unified tribal opposition from forming. This pragmatic manipulation of tribal dynamics allows the Houthis to isolate individual or small clusters of tribes, confronting them incrementally rather than risking a concerted, large-scale tribal coalition. This approach has been integral to their ability to maintain both territorial and political endurance despite sustained pressure from the Saudi-led coalition and other adversaries. Their adept engagement with Yemen's fluid and multifaceted tribal loyalties remains a cornerstone of their sustained military and political resilience.[84]

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[83] Ibid., 26–33.
[84] Abdulaziz Al-Saqqaf, "Yemen's Tribal Politics and the Houthi Movement," *Middle East Journal* 74, no. 3 (2020): 405–410.

Finally, the tribal dimension highlights fundamental challenges for conflict resolution and future state-building in Yemen. While the Houthis have evolved into a centralized authority in many respects, they continue to depend heavily on tribal networks for effective governance, resource mobilization, and maintaining social order. Tribal affiliations remain deeply embedded social bonds acting as a social glue for large segments of Yemen's population, reflective of power relations and governance mechanisms that formal state institutions have often failed to replace. Consequently, any durable political settlement in Yemen must recognize and incorporate this intricate system of tribal loyalties and grievances. A comprehensive understanding of the Houthis' tribal alliances is thus vital for grasping their capacity to govern and the broader complexities of Yemen's ongoing civil war.[85]

3.2.3 Complex Alliances

The Houthi movement, also known as Ansar Allah, has evolved into a significant regional actor in the geopolitics of West Asia and the Red Sea. Central to their strategy and resilience are their complex alliances with various non-state and state actors who share a common ideological and strategic opposition to imperialism, Western influence, and Zionism. These alliances link the Houthis to groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Shabaab in Somalia, as well as to Iran and other regional proxies. Moreover, the geopolitical roles of global powers like China and Russia intersect with these dynamics, influencing the broader regional contestations. This

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[85] Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "Tribalism and Conflict Resolution in Yemen," in *Yemen's Civil War and Social Dynamics*, ed. Marieke Brandt (Oxford University Press, 2021), 180–195.

interconnectedness enables the Houthis to augment their influence and operational reach, notably seen in their maritime campaign in the Red Sea. Understanding these alliances provides insight into the multifaceted nature of the conflict and the wider regional security challenges posed by the Houthis.[86]

The Houthis articulate their struggle through a strongly anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist discourse, framing their actions as resistance against the hegemonic order led by the United States, Israel, and their allies. Their slogan, "God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam," encapsulates this ideological stance and functions as a rallying cry alongside their military campaigns. This worldview aligns the Houthis with the broader "Axis of Resistance," which includes groups and states opposing Western dominance and Israeli policies in the region. Their maritime attacks targeting Israeli-affiliated vessels in the Red Sea are a concrete expression of this ideological and strategic opposition.

Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist movement engaged in an enduring conflict with Israel, shares with the Houthis a foundational opposition to Zionism and Western imperial influence in the West Asia. The Houthis have expressed explicit solidarity with Hamas, especially visible amidst the Gaza conflict escalation in October 2023. Their maritime campaigns were framed as acts supporting Palestinians and aimed at disrupting Israeli economic and military lifelines. Despite operational differences, with Hamas focusing on land and urban guerrilla warfare in Palestine and the Houthis

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[86] Daniel Byman, "Leverage Beyond Yemen: Ansar Allah and Its Iraqi Alliances," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 24, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/02/leverage-beyond-yemen-ansar-allah-and-its-iraqi-alliances?lang=en.

evolving asymmetric maritime and missile capabilities—the shared narrative of resistance provides a solid ideological bond, legitimizing their armed struggle as self-defense and liberation.[87]

The Lebanese Hezbollah shares even closer ideological, strategic, and operational affinity with the Houthis, underpinned by Shia Islamist ideology and resistance to Western and Israeli influence. Both movements identify as part of the "Axis of Resistance," leveraging asymmetric warfare to confront superior military powers. Iran acts as a significant patron for both groups, providing military assistance, strategic advice, and ideological support. Hezbollah's model of integrating political governance with armed resistance has likely influenced Houthi strategies in Yemen. Cooperation extends to logistical support, training, and shared strategic objectives, often facilitated through Iran as the regional patron.[88]

Although geographically distant and differing in sectarian affiliation, the Houthis, being Zaidi Shia, and al-Shabaab, a Sunni Salafi-jihadist group, have been reported to have pragmatic alliances between the two. Both oppose Western-backed governments and foreign military presence, sharing a broader anti-imperialist stance against Western influence in the Muslim world. This cooperation illustrates how local grievances and broader ideological opposition can intersect to create tactical alignments, even among groups with differing religious and regional identities. Al-

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[87] Tempo.co, "Fakta-Fakta Houthi Yaman, Sekutu Hamas yang Siap Lawan Israel," October 31, 2023, https://www.tempo.co/internasional/fakta-fakta-houthi-yaman-sekutu-hamas-yang-siap-lawan-israel-117866.

[88] Sindonews.com, "3 Organisasi Sekutu Hizbullah di Timur Tengah, Siapa Saja?," January 9, 2024,https://international.sindonews.com/read/1294791/45/3-organisasi-sekutu-hizbullah-di-timur-tengah-siapa-saja-1704787314/5.

Shabaab's sustained insurgency in Somalia exemplifies a form of resistance against powerful state actors supported externally, complementing the Houthis' approach to asymmetric warfare.[89]

Iran stands as the principal state sponsor and strategic partner of the Houthis, offering critical military, financial, and logistical support that has enabled the Houthis to develop advanced missile arsenals, unmanned aerial vehicles, and sophisticated operational capabilities in the Red Sea. Tehran frames its support as bolstering a resistance axis against Western and Israeli hegemony. Iran's naval presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden supports Houthi intelligence gathering and targeting, contributing to the sophistication of the maritime operations. The shared ideological opposition to Zionism, U.S. influence, and regional rivals like Saudi Arabia provides the overarching strategic framework for this alliance.

While ideologically divergent from the Houthis, who are Shia-influenced, reports indicate instances of tactical accommodation or pragmatic coexistence with Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and affiliated Sunni jihadist groups in broader operational theaters. This reflects the complex and fluid nature of alliances in conflict zones where opposition to shared enemies such as U.S. military forces and Western-backed regimes can temporarily overcome sectarian divides. Nonetheless, these relationships are marked by tension and competition, as sectarian and ideological differences often limit deep

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[89] Ibid.; see also YouTube footage, "NGERINYA KERJASAMA AL-SHABAB & HOUTH1! Pasukan Zionis ...," accessed August 2025.

cooperation. The mention of AQI in relation to the Houthis underscores the complexity of asymmetric warfare coalitions and proxy networks.[90]

Though China and Russia are not ideological allies of the Houthis, their geopolitical interests often intersect with the regional dynamics that empower or limit the Houthis. Both global powers generally oppose U.S.-led interventions and advocate for multipolarity and non-interference, which aligns with the Houthis' practical resistance to Western hegemony. China, through its expanding economic and strategic footprint in the Red Sea region, via investments such as ports and the Belt and Road Initiative, has vested interests in the stability of maritime routes. While not openly allied with the Houthis, Chinese interests complicate regional security calculations. Russia's regional military engagements, diplomatic posture, and permanent seat on the UN Security Council, where it has abstained or opposed some resolutions condemning the Houthis, indirectly position it against U.S. and Western policies, contributing to the multipolar environment in which the Houthis operate.[91]

The Houthis navigate a delicate balance between ideological commitments and pragmatic political-military calculations. Their alliances reflect shared goals of opposing imperialism and Zionism but also involve realpolitik considerations. Cooperation with actors holding divergent ideologies, even groups like al-Shabaab or AQI, is often conditioned by immediate tactical benefits and regional power dynamics. Iran's support remains emblematic of a strategic patron-client relationship sustaining Houthis' operational capabilities, while ties to groups like Hamas and Hezbollah

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[90] Byman, "Leverage Beyond Yemen."
[91] Ibid.

deepen the ideological resonance of their resistance narrative. This blend of ideology and pragmatism facilitates the Houthis' enduring influence despite intense military pressures.

The Houthis' complex network of alliances, spanning Islamist movements, regional state patrons, insurgent groups, and global powers, underscores their position as a central counter-hegemonic actor in West Asia. United by shared enemies in imperialism and Zionism, these alliances enable the Houthis to sustain and escalate asymmetric warfare, disrupt regional hegemony, and contest the established geopolitical order. Grasping these multifaceted relationships is critical for understanding the Houthis' strategic choices and the broader implications for regional security, maritime stability, and international power competition.

3.2.4 Regional and International Responses

International responses to the escalation of Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have taken the form of a complex, multi-layered set of military and diplomatic operations, involving the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and other partners. These operations are not only military initiatives but also reflections of broader approaches to deterrence, coalition-building, and the management of regional rivalry, particularly with Iran, within a legally and politically charged international framework.

At the forefront was Operation Prosperity Guardian, announced by the U.S. in December 2023 as an international effort to protect commercial shipping from escalating Houthi missile and drone attacks. While the operation claimed broad

multinational support. in practice, its naval composition was limited mainly to American and British assets, with only limited direct NATO participation. The operation's limitations soon became evident, as Houthi attacks persisted and the coalition's ability to ensure uninterrupted maritime security came into question. In response to these operational shortcomings, the U.S. and U.K. launched a parallel campaign, Operation Poseidon Archer, in January 2024. This new phase was characterized by more aggressive use of airpower, with warplanes from carriers and destroyers in the Red Sea targeting Houthi weapons depots, missile sites, and supply lines in Yemen. Despite the stated aim of significantly degrading Houthi military capabilities, the operation struggled to halt the group's attacks, as the Houthis claimed ongoing readiness and resilience, contesting the strategic effectiveness of the bombardment.[92]

Simultaneously, the European Union announced Operation ASPIDES in February 2024, a distinctly independent and defensive mission under the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy. ASPIDES, backed by an initial eight-million-euro budget for its first year, is coordinated from a command center in Larissa, Greece, and deploys four warships supplemented by aerial surveillance assets. Its primary task is to ensure freedom of navigation along vital maritime arteries such as the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden by protecting merchant shipping against missile and drone attacks. Unlike the more openly kinetic U.S.-led campaigns, ASPIDES emphasizes de-

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[92] European External Action Service, *Operation ASPIDES: Briefing Paper*, February 2024, 1–5.

escalation and maritime protection over direct military confrontation, reflecting a European desire to distinguish its role from more expansive coalition efforts.[93]

The American-British approach to Houthi deterrence has evolved through clearly defined but overlapping phases, blending what they term "measured" use of force with sustained diplomatic engagement. The strategy initially prioritized deterrence: amassing naval and air assets, launching targeted strikes intended less to destroy than to signal the West's willingness and ability to respond decisively. With limited effect, operations escalated into a "degradation" phase, expanding the scope and ambition of the strikes to systematically erode Houthi operational capacities by targeting command-and-control nodes, supply depots, launch sites, and Iranian resupply channels, including the electronic targeting of support vessels like the "Behshad." The prospect of a further transition into a "destruction" phase, entailing the systematic targeting of all elements of Houthi military power, remains a rhetorical tool, reserved partly as a warning and partly as strategic leverage for future escalation. To many Western strategists, the aim has been less to end all Houthi attacks than to impose such cumulative costs that the group's ability to sustain an intensive campaign against shipping would diminish over time, especially in the absence of continued Iranian materiel and technological support.[94]

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[93] European External Action Service, *EUNAVFOR OPERATION ASPIDES*, February 2024, accessed 6 August 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EUNAVFOR%20OPERATION%20ASPIDES_2024_0.pdf.

[94] Mansoor Leverett and Christopher Boucek, "Western Military Strategy Against the Houthis: Deterrence, Degradation, Destruction," *Brookings Institution Middle East Policy*, March 2024, 10–15.

Diplomatic and economic pressure have developed concurrently as a crucial parallel track. The U.S. and U.K. spearheaded UN Security Council Resolution 2722, which condemned the Houthi attacks and demanded their immediate cessation while offering political support for defensive actions in the Red Sea. Beyond this, Washington placed the Houthis on the Specially Designated Global Terrorist list, signaling willingness to reconsider their status should attacks cease. Both countries, working with allies, intensified targeted sanctions, not only on Houthi leadership and financial networks but also on their Iranian sponsors, aiming to disrupt illicit arms supply chains and funding streams. Britain and the U.S. both launched diplomatic overtures to Iran, via direct and indirect channels, often through mediators such as Oman, pressing Tehran to restrain its Yemeni allies. These efforts were rebuffed by Iranian officials, who denied direct control over Houthi conduct despite evidence of considerable material and advisory support.[95]

Multinational initiatives have thus proceeded alongside continued engagement with broader UN-led peace efforts. Both the EU and U.S. remain formally committed to supporting the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Yemen in negotiating a peace settlement that would halt Houthi attacks; however, these diplomatic overtures are complicated by the group's retention of a formidable arsenal of advanced missiles and drones. Western governments and their partners acknowledge that this arsenal provides the Houthis, and by extension Iran, ongoing leverage in both regional

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[95] United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2722*, January 10, 2024; U.S. Department of Treasury, "Sanctions on the Houthis and Iranian-backed Entities," 2024; Jonathan Schanzer, "Iran's Proxy War in Yemen," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 2024, 22–30.

bargaining and any peace process, raising concerns about whether maritime stability will be durable or merely transactional, subject to changes in political pressure and negotiation outcomes.[96]

In practice, these intertwined military, diplomatic, and economic approaches reveal the difficulties of achieving durable deterrence against a non-state actor embedded within complex tribal networks and benefiting from powerful external sponsors. The Western coalition's progression from "measured" deterrence to incremental escalation, coupled with international legal justifications rooted in the right to self-defense and freedom of navigation, illustrates both the ambition and the limits of current policy. Meanwhile, the adaptation and resilience of the Houthis, who have succeeded in maintaining operations despite sustained strikes and internal hardship, dramatize the evolving nature of maritime security challenges in the region. Hence, the international response in the Red Sea, combining operations such as Prosperity Guardian, Poseidon Archer, and ASPIDES, as well as diplomatic and economic instruments, encapsulates the broader dynamics of contemporary conflict management amid shifting patterns of regional power and persistent legal and political ambiguity.

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[96] United Nations, "Yemen Peace Process and Security Challenges," *Report of the Secretary-General*, April 2024, 8–12.

3.3 Escalation of Maritime Operations and the Red Sea Crisis (2023-2024)

In the wake of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen swiftly entered the conflict, expressing strong solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Their motivation, as stated by their leadership, was to support Palestinians in Gaza and to retaliate against what they viewed as a disproportionate Israeli response. This stance positioned the Houthis as a prominent member of the "Axis of Resistance," an alliance of Iran-backed groups in West Asia. Initially, the Houthis launched a series of missile and drone attacks directly at Israel, though most were intercepted by Israeli or U.S. naval forces.

The conflict escalated dramatically when the Houthis shifted their focus to maritime targets in the Red Sea. In the initial phase of their naval campaign, they specifically targeted ships with a perceived connection to Israel, aiming to disrupt its economy and exert pressure on the international community. A key example of this strategy was the high-profile seizure of the vehicle carrier *Galaxy Leader* on November 19, 2023. Houthi militants, using a helicopter and armed boats, hijacked the Bahamian-flagged, Japanese-operated, and British-owned vessel, taking its 25 crew members hostage. The ship was then taken to a Houthi-controlled port in Yemen, where it was held as a symbol of their solidarity with Gaza. This incident, along with subsequent attacks on other vessels with alleged ties to Israel, marked a significant turning point in the conflict, transforming a land-based war into a major crisis for global shipping.

3.3.1 Houthis material capabilities

Evaluating the Houthis' military capabilities and development is essential to understanding the evolution of their combat tactics, especially considering the Iranian support they receive as one of Tehran's regional proxies. It is also important to look at the Houthis' areas of concentration in Yemen and along the Red Sea coast, as well as the military strongholds situated on Yemeni territory and the numerous islands scattered throughout the Red Sea near the Yemeni coast, which act as launch points for their attacks on ships.

Regarding Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen, the group holds sway over the capital city of Sanaa and the surrounding governorates of Amran, Dhamar, Al-Bayda (central), Ibb (southwest), Raymah, and Al Mahwit (northwest). They also control most of Saada, Hajjah (northwest), and Al Jawf (northeast). A significant portion of the Al Hudaydah governorate is also under Houthi control, which includes most of Yemen's Red Sea coast and the ports of Hudaydah, Salif, and Ras Issa. Approximately 70% of the country's imports and foreign aid pass through these ports. As of December 2023, the total area under Houthi control accounted for about 22.8% of Yemen's landmass.

Because the internationally recognized Yemeni government controls parts of the Taiz governorate overlooking the Bab al-Mandab Strait, as well as the Yemeni coast along the Gulf of Aden, Houthi naval forces must take risks to project their power southward. They can either sail through the monitored strait, which contains foreign military bases, or use Iranian ships stationed in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, as Iran is the group's primary supporter and financier.

Over the past few years, Tehran has strengthened its military presence in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden under the pretext of combating piracy, intending to boost its intelligence capabilities. Currently, the frigate *Alborz* is stationed in the Red Sea, and the frigate *Jamaran* is in the Gulf of Aden. Additionally, the vessel *Behshad*, which serves as a spy base, has been operating off the Eritrean Dahlak Archipelago since 2021, following a direct attack on its predecessor, the *Saviz*, north of the Bab al-Mandab Strait in April 2021.

In November 2023, U.S. intelligence informed its Gulf allies that Tehran had dispatched three commercial vessels to the Red Sea: a cargo tanker converted into a reconnaissance ship, a support ship, and a container ship. All three provide logistical and intelligence support to the Houthis, supplying them with the information they need to target Israeli or American vessels in the Red Sea. This was done at the Houthis' request during a meeting with Iranian officials and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commanders in November 2023. This explains the Houthis' ability to distinguish Israeli ships from hundreds of others in the Red Sea, as the Iranian naval vessels possess advanced navigation systems. The Houthi military capabilities can be detailed as follows:

3.3.1.1 Missile Arsenal and Launch Centers

After the Houthis killed former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017, they inherited the Yemeni army's military arsenal, including its missile depots. Initially, they struggled to operate the army's missile stock, so they relied on two main factors. First, they recruited specialized military leaders from the former president's Republican Guard missile brigades. This included figures like Major General

Mohammed Nasser Al-Atifi, who became the Houthi government's Minister of Defense in 2018. Al-Atifi had a background as a commander of surface-to-surface missile batteries and had previously led a Scud missile brigade, which gave him the expertise to locate and utilize the country's missile depots and fuel types.

The second factor was Iranian support. Iranian and Hezbollah experts were brought in to provide the necessary expertise in handling, disassembling, assembling, and developing missiles. Iran also supplied the Houthis with advanced versions of Chinese and Russian missiles, either through smuggling or aerial delivery after the Houthis took control of Sanaa in 2014.[97]

During the Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea, they have used anti-ship cruise missiles with a range of 80 to 300 kilometers, including the *Sayyad* and *Sijjil* missiles. They have also used ballistic missiles, most notably the "*Tofan*"missile with a range of 1,350 to 1,900 kilometers, and the "Quds-2," "Quds-3," and "Quds-4" ballistic missiles, which have a range of 1,350 to 2,000 kilometers. These missiles require up-to-date intelligence on their targets, which is typically provided by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned surface vessels (USVs), or forces from Tehran, the Houthis' main backer.

The Yemeni army had a diverse arsenal of mostly Russian-made missiles, which the Houthis managed to seize. The most prominent types include:

1. Surface-to-surface missiles: Russian Scud B, C, and D missiles, Tochka and Frog-7 missiles, and Korean Hwasong-5 and Hwasong-6 missiles.

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[97] "Exclusive Report: Houthi Missile Arsenal Becomes Regional Threat to Israel and Allied Forces in Middle East," Army Recognition, 2025.

2. Surface-to-air missiles: Russian missile systems, most importantly the Sam-2, Sam-3, Sam-6, Sam-7, and S-300 systems.

3. Air-to-surface missiles: Russian missiles like the R-77, R-27, and R-73, which were mounted on Russian-made MiG aircraft from the Yemeni air force.

4. Anti-ship missiles: The most famous is the Chinese C-802 missile. After the war, the Houthis also acquired Iranian C-102 missiles.

The Houthis acquired many types of Iranian missiles through several channels. First, they were smuggled in during the six wars between the Yemeni army and the Houthis group. Second, following the Houthi coup in 2014 and before Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015, Iranian cargo planes established an air bridge to deliver Iranian missiles, most notably the Qiam-1. The third method involved disassembling missiles into parts and smuggling them into Yemen, where Iranian experts would reassemble them. This happened during the ceasefire period between March 2015 and 2022. Additionally, Iranian missiles entered through the port of Hudaydah after the inspection mechanism was halted or obstructed.[98]

The Houthi arsenal also includes Chinese missiles that were smuggled in during the six wars against the Yemeni army. These were later upgraded by Tehran. Notable examples include:

1. M-302: A short-range ballistic missile from the Chinese WS family, which was developed by Syria and renamed "Badr" by the Houthis.

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[98] "Exclusive: Houthi arsenal shocks the Pentagon's top weapons buyer," Axios, November 14, 2024.

2. Qiam-1 and Qiam-2: Iranian missiles (Burkan-2H, Dhu al-Fiqar/Burkan-3) that are upgraded versions of Scud missiles.

3. Somar: The Iranian naval missile (Quds-1) is an upgraded version of the Russian Somar missile.

In terms of accuracy, the Houthi missile arsenal has varying levels of precision:

4. Highly accurate missiles: Cruise missiles (surface-to-ship) are known for their high accuracy. They can evade radar by flying at low altitudes and can maneuver to avoid obstacles and air defense systems. Although the Houthis claim to have missiles with the same name (cruise missiles), such as the Quds-1, they failed to hit the Nissos tanker anchored at the Al-Dhaba oil port on October 21, 2022.

5. Accurate missiles (3–20-meter error margin): These are short-range ballistic missiles (surface-to-surface) equipped with electro-optical detectors, inertial navigation systems, and GPS. They also have four movable fins at the front. The Houthis use UAVs to get close to a potential target, locate and photograph it, and then provide the missiles with precise images and coordinates. The Badr-1B and Nakaal are key examples. The Houthis used these to attack vital facilities and camps in Marib, Taiz, and Mocha, but not to target cities in southern Saudi Arabia due to their short range.

6. Inaccurate missiles (500-2,000-meter error margin): These are medium-range ballistic missiles (surface-to-surface). The main examples are Burkan-1, Burkan-2, Burkan-3 (Dhu al-Fiqar), and Qiam-1.[99]

The Houthis have worked to develop their missile arsenal along three paths:

1. Increasing range: They did this by adding a fuel tank and reducing the weight of the warhead on the Russian Scud B and C missiles (which they call Burkan-1 and Burkan-2) and on the Korean Hwasong-5 and Hwasong-6 missiles.

2. Modifying function: They changed the use of some Russian missiles, like the Sam-2 and Sam-3 (which they call Qaher and Qaher-2), to be used against surface targets instead of aerial ones.

3. Adding a guidance system: This was done to some unguided Chinese missiles from the WS family, improving their accuracy from a 40-meter error margin to just 3 meters.

In March 2024, the Houthis announced that they had tested a solid-fuel hypersonic missile with a speed of Mach 8 (about 10,000 km/h). This would allow them to hit Israel, which is more than 2,000 miles away, in just 10 minutes. They threatened to use it in attacks against Israeli-linked ships. Hypersonic missiles pose a significant challenge to air defense systems because they can evade radar by flying on short wavelengths and at low altitudes, and their trajectory is unpredictable. Currently, no air defense systems can intercept these missiles, as existing systems are designed to detect slower, less maneuverable ballistic missiles.

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[99] "Houthi Arsenal," Wilson Center, January 28, 2025.

Western countries are skeptical that Tehran, the Houthis' main backer, possesses such missiles or can enter the global hypersonic arms race. This raises doubts about the Houthi claim. Iran first announced it had a hypersonic missile called "*Fattah*" on June 6, 2023, and the Houthis later announced the launch of a second version, "Fattah 2," on November 19, 2023. Western observers believe these announcements are part of an Iranian and Houthi propaganda campaign to display their military capabilities and threaten Israel's security.

According to a source close to the Houthis, the group has been developing its missiles and UAVs to increase its power after three months of trials, as reported by the Russian news agency "Novosti." A November 2023 report by the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen stated that the Houthis are significantly enhancing their military capabilities on land, at sea, and underwater, while also building up their arsenal of missiles and UAVs.

Regarding missile depots and launch centers, the Yemeni army used to store missiles in camps such as Al-Sawad, Al-Hafah, Al-Nahdain 48, and Al-Sama. After the Houthis took control of Sanaa, they moved most of the missiles to Saada and then distributed them to various launch centers, which have recently become active in the group's attacks on Israel.

The main missile launch centers are in Hudaydah, Hajjah, Saada, Al Jawf, Dhamar, Taiz, Al-Bayda, and Sanaa. There are also reports that the Houthis have stored missiles in forested areas, inside mountains, in depots between hills, and on remote islands and coastlines. A 2016 photo published by Agence France-Presse revealed that Iran stored missiles in underground silos, a practice that the Houthis have since

replicated in Yemen. This has made it easier to store and launch missiles from various locations without detection.

A January 2024 report by Sheba Intelligence indicated that the Houthis have active missile launch centers overlooking the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. These centers contain temporary missile depots within a complex geography, along with tactical passages that the group uses to transport missiles from strategic depots in Ibb, Dhamar, Sanaa, Amran, Saada, and Al-Bayda to the launch sites. The report also stated that the group has activated new launch centers, though their intended targets, whether they are limited to ships in the Red Sea or have broader goals, remain unknown.[100]

According to Sheba Intelligence, strategic missile depots are located in the central mountain range extending from Saada to Amran, Sanaa, Dhamar, and Ibb. Tactical missile depots are in the hinterland provinces like Hajjah, Al Mahwit, and Raymah. Launch centers are on the coastal areas of Hajjah and Hudaydah, the highlands of Taiz and Saada, and the desert of Al Jawf.
The new launch centers are as follows:

First Center: Launching missiles toward the Red Sea (west and north): This center is located along the Red Sea coast and its islands, particularly the ports of Hudaydah, Salif, Ras Issa, Al-Luhayyah, and Kamaran Island in the governorates of Hudaydah and Hajjah. It also contains temporary missile depots in areas such as Abs and Al-Shafaar in Hajjah, and Al-Qanawis, Al-Zaidiyah, Al-Duhai, Bajil, and Al-Durayhimi in Hudaydah. This center also serves as the main launch point for missiles

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[100] "Iran: Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East," Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), 2023.

targeting Tel Aviv. The Houthis have recently been preparing to build backup missile depots in the mountainous provinces adjacent to the Red Sea coast, such as Hajjah, Raymah, Al Mahwit, and Saada.

Second Center: Launching missiles toward Bab al-Mandab (southern Red Sea): This center is in the mountains of the Al-Amaki region and the old airport in the Taiz governorate. It overlooks Mocha, Bab al-Mandab, and Mayun Island, with an air distance of no more than 130 kilometers. Military positions in the Ibb and Dhamar governorates serve as strategic and tactical depots to ensure missiles can reach the launch center in time.

Third Center: Launching missiles toward the Gulf of Aden: The highlands of Mukayras in the Al-Bayda governorate are a major launch center, as they overlook the Gulf of Aden with an air distance of approximately 70 kilometers. This center can threaten shipping lanes in the Gulf of Aden. The military camps in Raddah, the capital of Al-Bayda, serve as a tactical and strategic depot for ballistic and naval missiles.

Fourth Center: Al Hazm District in Al Jawf Governorate: Missile launch centers have been activated in Al Hazm, the capital of the Al Jawf region, on the border with Saudi Arabia. From Al Jawf, Houthi missiles have struck Marib and Saudi and Emirati facilities. They have also attempted to target the Israeli port of Eilat despite the distance of over 1,000 kilometers. Al Jawf serves as both a missile launch center and a tactical missile depot.

Observers have noted that the group has seven naval bases and 30 observation posts along the Yemeni coast, equipped with radar and electro-optical guidance systems to improve missile launch control. This constitutes a massive coastal defense

line. They also use the AIS system, which allows them to publicly track commercial shipping and identify vessels, in addition to the intelligence support they receive from Tehran. In September 2023, the Houthis displayed 32 different missile models, eight of which they claimed were new versions. However, not all their missiles are marked because they have never been used, suggesting that the group uses its diverse arsenal of short, medium, and long-range missiles, as well as air defense missiles, for propaganda purposes.

3.3.1.2 Reconnaissance and Suicide UAVs

The Houthis' arsenal includes UAVs for both reconnaissance and attack missions. These drones are equipped with GPS and can autonomously travel toward their targets along pre-programmed waypoints. Key examples include the "Qasef-1" drone, which is fitted with a warhead, and the "Rased" remote-controlled drone, originally a Skywalker X-8, used for surveillance and reconnaissance. Other reconnaissance drones are the "Raqib" and "Hudhud-1." The "Samad" drone, designed for reconnaissance, has also been used by the Houthis as a loitering munition in several attacks.

The group also possesses the "Samad-3" suicide drone, with a range of 1,200 to 1,500 kilometers and a payload of up to 18 kilograms of explosives. Additionally, they have the "Wa'eed" drone, like the Iranian Shahed-136, with a range of up to 2,500 kilometers.

3.3.1.3 Unmanned Surface Vessels (USVs)

The Houthis have small, explosive-laden USVs that pose a challenge to surveillance forces in the Red Sea, especially around the Bab al-Mandab Strait. They

are used to land militants from helicopters or other boats. The militants board the targeted vessel and seize control. These USVs pose a significant threat to maritime navigation due to the difficulty of detecting them and tracking their routes.

Despite the variety of weapons used by the Houthis in their Red Sea escalation, some have not yet been deployed, such as Iranian-made "Sadaf" sea mines. Although these are not very advanced and are easy to plant, their use would have a massive impact on shipping.

Regarding the Houthi military presence on the Yemeni islands in the vital international waterway, a December 2023 report from Sheba Intelligence, which specializes in open-source intelligence, confirmed that the Houthis have established naval military bases on Yemeni islands in the Red Sea. They have a permanent military presence on the strategic islands of Kamaran and Antufash and operate boats in the eastern part of the international shipping lane.

Sheba Intelligence reported that work on Kamaran Island began in mid-2023, but the group's efforts to establish a military presence there accelerated after the start of the Israeli-Gaza war in October 2023. Equipment, including surveillance devices and at least two radars, was moved to two locations on Kamaran Island. Combat boats, unmanned explosive boats, and specialized personnel were also moved to the island between June and August. It is believed that UAVs and their launch platforms were also transferred to the new base. Sources told the agency that the Houthis are using the mangrove forests on the eastern side of Kamaran Island as excellent cover to avoid detection by drones and satellites. Two sources on Kamaran Island told Sheba that the Houthis are conducting constant patrols east of the island, preventing fishermen from

approaching certain areas. They also reported hearing gunfire and explosions from the eastern side of the island several times during October and November, which appear to be military drills.

The agency had previously received information that Kamaran Island had been turned into a missile launch platform. An earlier report from September 2023 revealed that the Houthis were training in the Al-Luhayyah area to attack ships. As for the Houthis' military presence on Antufash Island, Sheba Intelligence stated that the Houthis established a presence there in November 2023, and that equipment was moved from Kamaran to Antufash following the October 7th "Al-Aqsa Flood" attack.

3.3.2 Broadening of the maritime operations

Although the Houthis escalation in the Red Sea was not the first, and the group has good combat experience in carrying out this type of attack in a region of great geostrategic importance like the Red Sea corridor, the Houthis' decision to direct their strikes at ships passing through the Red Sea is a new tactic for the group. This comes after they failed to launch successful strikes inside the occupied Palestinian territories, including the Israeli port of Eilat, since October 10, 2023. At that time, the Houthi group, in coordination with the Iran-backed "Axis of Resistance," threatened to launch missiles and unmanned aircraft at Israel if the United States intervened in the war to support Tel Aviv.

After about nine days of Israeli escalation in Gaza, the Houthis launched a barrage of one-way unmanned aircraft and cruise missiles at Israel. The majority targeted the port of Eilat, located more than 1,800 kilometers from the Houthi missile base near Sana'a and about 1,600 kilometers from their nearest controlled area in

Yemen. However, the Israeli defense system was able to intercept them. On October 31, the Houthi group escalated its operations by launching a medium-range ballistic missile, which Israel successfully intercepted with the "Arrow-2" defense system. This was in parallel with their launch of a barrage of missiles and unmanned aircraft on the city of Eilat, which the group announced on November 1, 6, 9, and 14.

With the repeated failure of the Houthis to penetrate the Israeli defense system, the group turned to searching for another way to pressure Tel Aviv, Washington, and Western countries. They found an easy target with widespread international repercussions in the Red Sea: targeting ships and threatening international trade. This became the group's main objective, and the Houthi escalation in the Red Sea has so far seen a development in combat tactics, passing through two stages, which can be explained as follows:

The first phase of the Houthi escalation in the Red Sea began with a statement by the Houthi leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, on November 16, 2023. He said that the group's "eyes are open to monitor any ships owned or operated by Israeli companies" passing through the Red Sea. Indeed, on November 19, 2023, a group of Houthis landed via a helicopter on the car carrier "Galaxy Leader," owned by Israeli billionaire Abraham Ungar and operated by Japan. They hijacked the ship and took it to the coast of Yemen. This was followed by the group targeting the container ship "CMA CGM Symi," which is linked to Israel, in the Indian Ocean using a one-way attack drone. The group then expanded its targets to include all ships heading to Israel, issuing warnings that the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the surrounding waters would be closed to ships linked to Israel and any warships directly or indirectly protecting them.

Some reports indicated that during the period from December 10-14, 2023, the Houthis targeted a French frigate and commercial cargo ships flying the flags of Norway, the Marshall Islands, and Hong Kong. The attack on December 11 was one of the rare attacks that hit its target after the Norwegian-flagged tanker "Strinda" was struck, setting its hull on fire. A U.S. destroyer intervened to rescue the ship and its crew. During the period from November 19 to December 31, the number of targeted ships reached about 11, which were either Israeli ships or heading to one of their ports, according to statistics from the "Yemen Echo" website.

With the intensification of U.S. military deployments in the Red Sea following the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip, U.S. military assets became targets for the Houthi group. On November 9, the group shot down a U.S. MQ-9 unmanned aircraft in the Red Sea region. On November 26, the U.S. destroyer USS Mason thwarted an attempt to seize the chemical tanker "Central Park," which is owned by Israelis, in the Gulf of Aden. Following this, the Houthis launched two ballistic missiles at the USS Mason, but they did not cause any damage to the ship. This was followed by the targeting of the UK-owned cargo ship "Unity Explorer" on December 4, which also did not result in any damage to the ship.

On another front, Houthi forces began to improvise naval maneuvers and integrate geospatial technology and intelligence capabilities to monitor and identify ships to be attacked and targeted. Since November 12, Houthi forces have been training their soldiers in amphibious naval assault teams, with training including launching dummy missiles at fake naval ships and simulating raids on ships. Houthi

naval officers also met at least twice during November 2023 in a joint operations room in the port of Hodeidah to update their naval reconnaissance patrol strategies.

On November 27, the commanders agreed that the reconnaissance patrols would consist of three groups. Each group would be composed of two fast boats, a communications boat, and a drone. The communications boats were equipped with an international communication device (AIS), enabling the naval patrols to communicate with and address ships. The drones collect the coordinates and images of the ships and transmit them to the land-based operations centers. In another meeting on December 4, it was agreed to add two boats to the naval patrol formations, responsible for planting sea mines if the targeted ships refused to respond and cooperate or if the patrols encountered hostile warships. Houthi military commanders also confirmed that intelligence teams had been tasked with tracking the coordinates of the ships and transmitting them to the land-based "missile brigades", a process that is likely easy due to the presence of dozens of signal boosters that the Houthis have installed on 4G internet towers on the coasts of *Hodeidah*. This is according to sources in *Hodeidah* and the Houthi-run naval command and control room. The boosters work to expand the range of naval vessel tracking capabilities by about 20 nautical miles, while Houthi sources reported that suspected Iranian intelligence ships docked in the southern and northern Red Sea on December 3 and 5, respectively.

It is also noteworthy that in December 2023, the Houthi group carried out dual attacks on ships passing through the Red Sea, consisting of strikes via missiles or drones in parallel with piracy operations in an attempt to seize the ships. This was

followed by the group's use of Unmanned Underwater Vehicles in their operations in February 2024.

With the continuation of Israeli escalation and massacres in the Gaza Strip and the Israeli government's confirmation of its intention to carry out a military operation in Rafah, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthi group in Yemen, announced in February 2024 that the naval operations carried out by the Houthis in the Red Sea had developed "in quantity and quality, and missiles, drones, and military boats have been activated, and submarines have been introduced into operations in the sea, which is worrying for the enemy." This weapon represents a serious threat because it disables ships' defense systems and can execute a multi-faceted attack called a swarm attack. Days before al-Houthi's statement, the U.S. military had indicated that the Houthis had used underwater drones. This was followed by the U.S. Department of Defense (the Pentagon) carrying out defensive strikes on five targets in Houthi military areas in Yemen.

In a challenge to Western powers and a display of the group's intelligence capabilities, al-Houthi announced that his group had achieved an "informational breakthrough" that surprised their enemies by obtaining information about the identity of ship owners, their affiliations, and destinations. He challenged the United States to prove that the targeted ships were not of the announced classification and were not affiliated with Americans, Britons, or Israelis.

One of the militaries gains the group achieved as a result of its repeated strikes on ships and U.S. destroyers in the Red Sea is that the Houthi group exposed a defense vulnerability in the U.S. and Western naval vessels in the Red Sea. This is that at the

moment warships launch missiles, the self-defense systems on board these vessels become disabled, which makes them an easy target for Houthi strikes, especially with the Houthis' threat that they have hypersonic missiles. This is even though the disablement of the warships' self-defense systems happens while the other warships and boats stationed in the Red Sea are providing security and protection.

The Houthi escalation did not stop there. On March 15, the Houthis announced that they would expand their naval military operations to include ships passing through the Indian Ocean and heading towards the Cape of Good Hope in the southern part of the African continent, according to the spokesman for the Houthi armed forces, Yahya Sarea. The latter also announced that Houthi forces had targeted about three Israeli and American ships in the Indian Ocean, warning ships linked to Israel against passing through the Cape of Good Hope corridor. This would tighten the siege on Tel Aviv, after their success in blockading the port of Eilat in the Gulf of Aqaba in the Red Sea. Targeting ships passing through the Indian Ocean is also expected to lead to a growing increase in insurance prices for shipments and a steady rise in shipping costs in general. Since the beginning of the escalation in the Red Sea until April 2024, the total number of Houthi strikes has reached about 90 ships, while U.S. and British strikes on Houthi military sites have resulted in the deaths of 37 elements and the injury of 30 others in 424 airstrikes launched by the United States and Britain on areas controlled by their militias in northern Yemen over about three months.

Over the past few days, specifically since the end of March 2024, the second phase of Houthi policy regarding the escalation in the Red Sea has begun, as Houthi strikes in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden have shown a clear decline. This has been

monitored through two indicators. First: The statements of Houthi spokesman Yahya Sarea stopped for more than a week since the targeting of the gas tanker in the Red Sea on March 19. It wasn't until Sarea stated on March 26 that he announced the adoption of four Houthi attacks against commercial ships and a fifth attack against two American destroyers within 72 hours, despite doubts about the execution of these attacks. The UK Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO), the British maritime security firm Ambrey, and the U.S. Central Command did not monitor any of these four attacks, while reports did monitor one Houthi attack on a Chinese ship that the group claimed was British.

The second indicator is that the Houthi group carried out about six attacks against commercial ships and American naval vessels stationed in this corridor during the second half of March, compared to nine attacks during the first half of March. Furthermore, out of a total of about 90 ships that were targeted by the Houthi group up to April 2024, about 86 American, British, and Israeli ships were targeted up to mid-March. This means that the number of strikes increased by only four attacks over two weeks.

The Houthi group justified the decline in the rate of strikes on ships in the Red Sea by stating that the movement of ships passing through the Red Sea had declined and that ship movement had become more like smuggling. Others attributed the decline in Houthi strikes in the Red Sea to the U.S. and British strikes over about three months since January 2024 against Houthi military sites and positions in Yemen. This is amidst the monitoring operations carried out by surveillance ships to thwart naval attempts to smuggle weapons from Tehran to the Houthi group, and thus the failure of

any attempts to supply the group with weapons and compensate for the military losses the group incurred as a result of the Western strikes. These strikes likely played a role in undermining the Houthis' ability to carry out their strikes at the same rate as in previous months.

On the other hand, the decline in Houthi strikes on ships in the Red Sea can be linked to the Yemeni settlement file, in an attempt by the group to demonstrate its efforts to de-escalate in the Red Sea. This comes after the Houthi group launched calls stating the group's desire to return to the peace process in Yemen, despite the three contentious Houthi preconditions of a complete end to the siege, a prisoner exchange, and compensation for damages. This reveals the falseness of these Houthi calls, which coincided with the decrease in the rate of Houthi strikes in the Red Sea and may aim to buy time to rearrange their cards and strengthen their military capabilities after the group was subjected to American and British strikes over about three months. On March 25, the Houthi group announced its readiness to sign the peace roadmap in Yemen, and it also called on the Arab coalition to take a similar step "to block the path for war merchants."

Meanwhile, some have linked the de-escalation in the Red Sea with the economic pressure imposed by the legitimate Yemeni government on the Houthi group. This follows the Yemeni government's directives on April 3, 2024, for banks operating in Houthi areas to relocate to Aden within 60 days. This was in response to the Houthi group's announcement in late March 2024 of coining a new metallic currency of the 100 Yemeni riyal denomination. The group claimed this was to counter the damage to banknotes of the same denomination in its controlled areas, and it hinted

at printing other denominations. This would deepen the financial division and tighten the movement of money, goods, and transfers, leading the situation in Yemen to a new level of monetary and banking division, with repercussions on the failure of a political settlement and the fueling of the conflict in Yemen.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOUTHI CAMPAIGN AS A CHALLENGE TO HEGEMONY (A HISTORICAL STRUCTURES ANALYSIS)

This chapter applies Robert W. Cox's framework of Historical Structure Analysis (HSA) to the Houthi Red Sea campaign. It will move beyond the descriptive analysis of Chapter III to theoretically explain how the Houthi movement's actions constitute a direct challenge to the established hegemonic world order and regional power structures. By examining the interplay of material capabilities, ideas, and institutions, this chapter will argue that the Houthi campaign is a powerful case study of counter-hegemonic behavior.

4.1 Houthis as a counter-hegemony to the regional hegemony in West Asia

4.1.1 War of Position (passive revolution)

In Robert Cox's critical theory, drawing heavily from Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, the "war of position" designates a prolonged, ideological, and institutional struggle where counter-hegemonic actors aim to erode the legitimacy of dominant power structures. Rather than engaging in immediate confrontation, the war of position emphasizes building alternative social meanings, narratives, and organizational frameworks that sustain a new foundational legitimacy. This process involves cultivating broad-based consent, working through cultural, ideological, and

institutional spheres to build the social and political groundwork necessary for eventual transformative change.[101]

For the Houthis, the war of position is reflected in a multifaceted construction of counter-hegemonic identity and institutions embedded deeply within Yemen's sociopolitical fabric and extending regionally. They have advanced an ideological discourse rooted in anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, and resistance to hegemonic oppression; their emblematic slogan, "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam," encapsulates a potent oppositional worldview that delegitimizes Western and regional hegemonies and frames their struggle as part of a larger civilizational resistance.[102]

Beyond ideology, the Houthis have built institutional alternatives that directly contest the Yemeni state institutions. The establishment of the Supreme Political Council after its 2014 capture of Sanaa is central, symbolizing a proactive claim to political legitimacy.[103]Additionally, their governance frameworks include entities such as the Humanitarian Operations Coordination Centre, which regulates port activities and collects fees, functioning as a de facto governmental apparatus. [104] These institutions perform both administrative tasks and serve symbolic roles in constructing an autonomous center of authority.

[101] Cox, Robert W. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126–55.

[102] Cox, Robert W. "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (1983): 162–75.

[103] Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.

[104] Baron, Ali. "The Ideological Foundations of the Houthi Movement." *Middle East Review Quarterly*, 2025.

Building social consent is another pillar of their war of position. The Houthis leverage tribal, religious, and nationalist networks, blending Zaydi Shia identity with broader nationalist narratives that resonate with northern Yemeni communities historically marginalized within the Yemeni state framework.[105]Presenting themselves as deeply embedded in local customs, this social mobilization continually regenerates local support, offering durability against external military pressure. Thus, the Houthis' war of position comprises the ideological delegitimization of hegemony, the creation of institutional structures asserting alternative authority, and the cultivation of lasting social legitimacy, a slow, comprehensive buildup of counter-hegemonic power.

4.1.2 War of Movement

The "war of movement," as distinguished from the war of position, involves direct, forceful, and rapid military actions designed to seize power and disrupt existing hegemonic structures before they can effectively respond. Rooted in Gramscian thought and applied in Robert Cox's critical theory, this concept pertains to swift offensive campaigns that seek to physically and operationally challenge dominant power relations.

In the case of the Houthis, this war of movement is clearly manifested in their asymmetric military operations that employ bold, disruptive tactics to compensate for their conventional military disadvantages. The group has developed a sophisticated arsenal including ballistic and cruise missiles capable of striking vital maritime and land targets at extended ranges, enabling them to threaten key strategic locations with

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[105] Al-Muslimi, Nabil. "Political Identity and Resistance in Yemen." *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 2025.

precision. Additionally, they leverage suicide drones and unmanned surface vessels (USVs), which introduce added layers of unpredictability and complexity for opposing naval forces, effectively complicating traditional defense measures.[106]

Operationally, the Houthis have demonstrated high-profile actions such as the audacious hijacking of commercial vessels, most notably the MV Galaxy Leader in November 2023, showcasing their capacity to extend the conflict beyond traditional battlefields and assert influence over international maritime trade routes. Militarily, they have rapidly seized and consolidated control over critical urban centers, including Yemen's capital, Sanaa, as well as vital Red Sea ports such as Hudaydah, Salif, and Ras Issa. Control of these key locations allows the Houthis to impose blockades, regulate maritime commerce, and establish missile launch platforms, thereby reshaping the power dynamics both on land and at sea.

Furthermore, the Houthis have expanded their operational reach and innovation over time. Initially focusing their efforts on Yemeni territory, their maritime campaign now covers broader areas of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and even parts of the Indian Ocean. This expansion is supported by Iranian technological and intelligence assistance, which enhances their surveillance capabilities, targeting precision, and operational coordination.[107] Collectively, these rapid and flexible actions form a decisive campaign aimed at disrupting the strategic and economic hegemony of dominant regional powers, while imposing substantial military and

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[106] Wilson Center. "Missile Threats and Maritime Conflict in the Red Sea." Policy Brief, 2025.
[107] Rodriguez-Diaz, Cristina et al. "Maritime Security and the Red Sea Conflict." *Naval War College Review*, 2024.

economic costs disproportionate to their conventional strength. This combination of technological sophistication, tactical creativity, territorial control, and operational ambition demonstrates how the Houthis employ their war of movement strategy to challenge and destabilize existing regional hegemonies effectively.[108]

4.1.3 Synthesis: Interplay of War of Position and War of Movement

Cox's framework emphasizes that sustainable counter-hegemonic transformation requires a synthesis of both the war of position and war of movement, with ideological, institutional, and social groundwork supporting military offensives, while military gains reinforce the broader ideological and institutional project. The Houthis exemplify this interplay by sustaining a War of Position: Actively building counter-hegemonic legitimacy through governance, social embedding, and ideological narratives that challenge the dominant regional order, creating a resilient base that endures beyond short-term military confrontations.

Executing a War of Movement: Simultaneously deploying innovative asymmetric military tactics to directly challenge state and coalition forces, disrupting economic flows, seizing key strategic territories, and forcing hegemonic powers to recalibrate their strategies.

This synthesis allows the Houthis to contest not only the material bases of power, such as military control and economic resources, but also the discursive and institutional foundations of legitimacy that support hegemonic dominance in Yemen and the broader Red Sea region. Their combined strategic approach transforms them

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[108] Maritime Trade Analysis Group. *Impact of Armed Groups on International Maritime Trade*, 2024.

into a significant regional actor capable of challenging entrenched power structures through a complex and adaptive campaign of structural transformation.

4.2 Broader Implications of Houthis' Maritime Strategies for Security and Trade in the Red Sea

The maritime strategies employed by the Houthis in the Red Sea have yielded extensive and multifaceted implications for regional security and global trade, fundamentally reshaping the strategic dynamics of one of the world's most crucial maritime corridors. These implications transcend immediate military confrontations to encompass economic, geopolitical, environmental, and humanitarian dimensions, thereby underscoring the complexity of contemporary asymmetric maritime conflict.

1. Impact on Regional and Global Maritime Security

Houthis' sustained attacks on commercial shipping and strategic chokepoints such as the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait have significantly undermined the security environment in the Red Sea. Their use of advanced weaponry, including ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, kamikaze drones, and swarming unmanned surface vessels, has exposed vulnerabilities in naval defenses traditionally maintained by regional and international powers. This asymmetry complicates maritime patrol and convoy operations, forcing costly and resource-intensive multinational coalition efforts such as the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian and the EU's Operation Aspides to secure shipping lanes.

The heightened threat levels and persistent attacks have increased risks not only for vessels directly targeted but also for the broader maritime traffic transiting these waterways. This insecurity incentivizes rerouting to longer, less volatile paths,

intensifies naval militarization, and perpetuates a cycle of escalation in a geopolitically sensitive region. Furthermore, these attacks have escalated tensions between regional powers, primarily Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and allied states, contributing to the Red Sea becoming a proxy arena where local insurgency intertwines with broader strategic confrontations.

2. Disruption to Global Trade and Economic Costs

The Red Sea functions as a vital artery for global trade, connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa. Approximately 12% of global maritime trade and 30% of container traffic pass through the Suez Canal and adjacent Red Sea routes. The Houthis' maritime campaign since late 2023 has led to a drastic reduction, estimated at around 70%, in shipping traffic through this corridor, severely disrupting the flow of goods such as natural gas, petroleum, automobiles, and manufactured products.[109]

Major shipping companies have rerouted vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, increasing voyage distances by approximately 50%, thereby lengthening transit times by 10 to 14 days. This shift has triggered substantial increases in fuel consumption, raising voyage costs by approximately $1 million per journey. Additionally, war-risk insurance premiums for ships navigating the Red Sea surged from 0.05% to nearly 1.0% of cargo value, cumulatively costing the shipping industry hundreds of millions annually. These elevated costs cascade through global supply chains, increasing freight rates sharply; some shipping routes have seen rate hikes exceeding 200%, and

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[109] Baksi, Amrita. "Red Sea Shipping Crisis: How Houthi Attacks are Disrupting Global Trade Routes." Acuity Knowledge Partners, 2025.

contributing to inflationary pressures in sectors reliant on just-in-time manufacturing, such as automotive and electronics.[110]

3. Humanitarian and Environmental Ramifications

The disruptions caused by Houthi maritime operations have had severe humanitarian consequences, particularly for Yemen and neighboring countries dependent on Red Sea shipping for aid delivery. Delays extending aid shipments by weeks have exacerbated food insecurity, disease outbreaks, and malnutrition, with millions at heightened risk. Furthermore, the diversion of shipping routes has escalated carbon emissions significantly. Longer voyages increased CO_2 emissions by over 30% along major Asia-Europe routes due to higher fuel consumption, thus negating some efforts to curb greenhouse gases in global shipping.

4. Geopolitical and Strategic Considerations

Strategically, the Houthis' ability to control and threaten critical maritime corridors challenges not only regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt but also global actors reliant on secure sea lines of communication. The disruptions impose constraints on regional development initiatives, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, by increasing transportation costs and reducing investor confidence. They also influence broader geopolitical alignments by compelling states to enhance naval deployments, recalibrate alliances, and invest in alternative trade corridors like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

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[110] Ibid.

The maritime disruption in the Red Sea also reflects an evolving paradigm where non-state actors wield disproportionate influence on global commerce and security through asymmetric maritime warfare, reshaping maritime norms and challenging the conventional state-centric security order.

This analysis highlights that the Houthis' maritime strategies in the Red Sea trigger profound and interlinked consequences for economic stability, regional security balances, humanitarian welfare, and environmental sustainability. Mitigating these challenges requires coordinated military, diplomatic, and economic responses attuned to the complex realities of asymmetric maritime conflict in a globally vital corridor

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

5.1 CONCLUSIONS

The Houthis' maritime strategies in the Red Sea during 2023–2024 evolved into a sophisticated counter-hegemonic campaign challenging the dominance of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and their allies. Lacking conventional military strength, the Houthis relied on low-cost asymmetric tactics such as UAVs, suicide drones, and anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, employing swarm attacks to overwhelm advanced missile defenses. Their operations targeted predominantly Israeli-linked vessels, exemplified by the 2023 hijacking of the MV Galaxy Leader, reflecting political solidarity with Gaza and ideological resistance to Israeli military actions.

Initially focused near Yemen's coast, the Houthis expanded their reach into broader Red Sea areas, including the strategically vital Bab el-Mandeb Strait, threatening global shipping routes and prompting significant regional and international security responses. Their persistent attacks exposed vulnerabilities in the hegemonic maritime control, forcing costly defensive measures on dominant naval powers and revealing a cost asymmetry favoring Houthi tactics.

Beyond military actions, the Houthis framed their campaign within a strong counter-hegemonic ideological narrative rejecting Western and Zionist dominance, symbolized by their slogan "Death to America, Death to Israel." This narrative positioned them as defenders of oppressed peoples, contesting the legitimacy of the established maritime security order. The campaign also highlighted shortcomings in

116

international governance, as global institutions and coalitions struggled to effectively deter or neutralize the Houthi threat, revealing challenges in addressing asymmetric and ideologically driven non-state actors.

5.2 Research limitations

The limitations of the research on "The Houthis' Maritime Strategy in the Red Sea as a Counter-Hegemony to Zionism in the Region" are as follows:

1. Temporal Scope Limitation: The research focuses only on the period from late 2023 (after the October 7th attacks) to the end of 2024. This excludes earlier phases of Houthi maritime activities and limits understanding of longer-term strategic evolution.

2. Geographical Limitation: The study is restricted to the Red Sea region, particularly maritime routes affected by Houthi operations. It does not encompass broader Yemeni conflict zones or other regional maritime areas unless directly relevant.

3. Actor Focus Limitation: The research centers primarily on the Houthis as the unit of analysis, with limited examination of other regional actors or non-state groups unless they are directly linked to the Houthis maritime strategy.

4. Data Source Limitation: The study relies exclusively on secondary data from academic articles, official reports, media outlets, and think tanks, omitting primary data collection such as interviews or fieldwork, which may limit empirical depth.

5. Operational and Tactical Analysis Limitation: While it analyzes ideological narratives and regional impacts, the research acknowledges less emphasis on

detailed internal Houthi decision-making, factional interests, and evolving tactical innovations over time.

6. Comparative Analysis Limitation: The draft primarily compares Houthis' maritime strategies with a few other asymmetric maritime actors, lacking broader comparative frameworks that could enrich understanding of similar movements globally.

7. Institutional and Governance Analysis Limitation: Though touching on institutional aspects, the research might not fully explore the complexities of regional and international governance responses and their effectiveness.

8. Theoretical Scope Limitation: The use of Robert Cox's critical theory provides a comprehensive framework, but may limit engagement with alternative theoretical approaches that could offer additional insights.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should focus on a comprehensive empirical assessment of the evolving technological capabilities of the Houthis' missile and unmanned systems arsenal. While current studies have documented the types and ranges of missiles and drones used by the Houthis, there remains a significant gap in detailed technical analysis of their operational effectiveness, command and control networks, and integration of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems. Investigating the extent to which Iranian and other external support shapes these capabilities, especially in terms of precision targeting and asymmetric warfare

innovation, will provide valuable insights for regional security and counter-strategy formulation.

Additionally, the geopolitical implications of Houthi maritime operations on global trade and international maritime security merit deeper exploration. Given the critical importance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and Red Sea corridor for global energy and commerce, future studies should quantitatively model the broader economic consequences of Houthi disruptions, including freight rate fluctuations, insurance premiums, and rerouting costs. Research could also examine how increased naval deployments by regional and extra-regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia, the United States, China, and the UAE, affect strategic stability and the potential for escalation or conflict management in this vital maritime domain.

Another fertile avenue for research involves analyzing the sociopolitical dimensions of Houthi maritime strategies within Yemen and the broader region. Specifically, scholars should investigate how the Houthis' control of maritime chokepoints influences domestic legitimacy, resource access, and socio-economic conditions under their governance. Coupling this with the study of information warfare tactics employed by the Houthis, such as propaganda framing their maritime attacks as anti-imperial resistance, can enhance understanding of the narrative battles that accompany kinetic confrontations, shedding light on the movement's ability to sustain support despite military pressure.

Moreover, comparative studies contrasting the Houthis' asymmetric maritime tactics with those employed by similar non-state actors in other strategic chokepoints worldwide would enrich theoretical frameworks on insurgency, proxy warfare, and

hegemony contestation in maritime security. Drawing lessons from groups operating in the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Guinea, or the Malacca Strait, future research could propose nuanced policy and military responses tailored to the unique operational environments shaped by geography, technological access, and proxy patronage.

Finally, there is a critical need to study the prospects and challenges for diplomatic resolutions incorporating maritime security considerations. Future work should assess existing international legal frameworks, regional security arrangements, and peace process mechanisms in light of asymmetric maritime threats. Evaluating potential confidence-building measures, arms control agreements, or inclusive governance models that address the Houthis' strategic incentives to target shipping routes will be essential for sustainable conflict de-escalation and restoring safe maritime commerce in the Red Sea region.
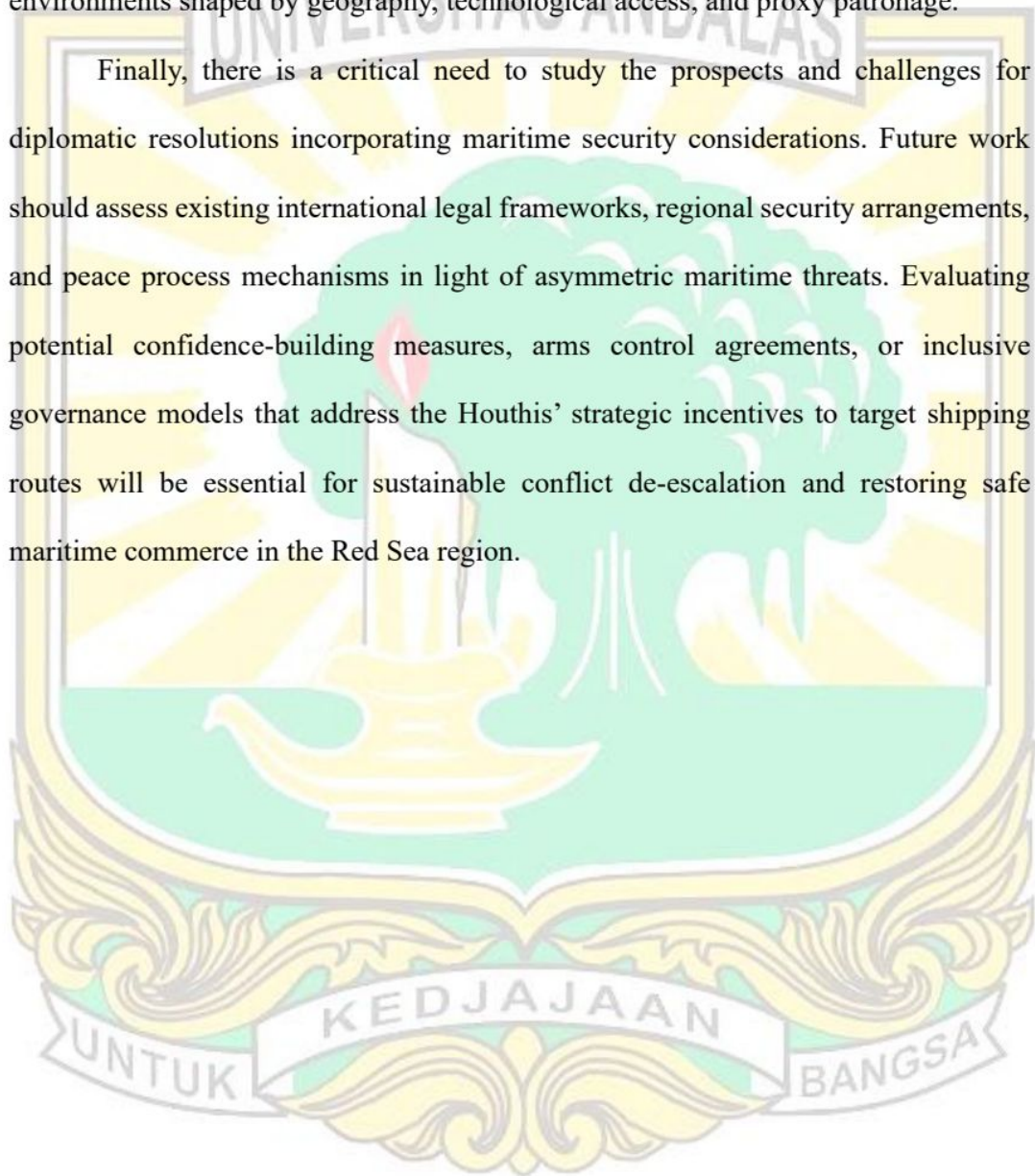
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