

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

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

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

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

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

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,

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

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.

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

detering 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

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.

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

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

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

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),

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 HOUTHİ 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.