

Calming the Red Sea's Turbulent Waters

March 2025



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	i
I. Introduction	1
II. A Military High Tide.....	3
A. A Scramble to Deploy	3
B. The Yemen War.....	5
III. War in Gaza and the Houthi Offensive.....	9
A. The Houthis Escalate	9
B. The Houthis' Motives.....	12
1. Riding a wave of support for the Palestinians	12
2. Being a reliable ally	15
IV. A Volatile Conflict in the Red Sea	18
A. The U.S. Strikes Back.....	18
B. The Houthis and Their Adversaries Double Down	21
C. A Short-lived Truce.....	22
V. The Ripple Effects of Red Sea Violence.....	25
VI. Conclusion.....	27

Principal Findings

What's new? Renewed violence between the U.S. and the Houthis in Yemen has brought a sudden end to the short-lived calm in the Red Sea during the Gaza ceasefire. The end of the truce threatens a dangerous escalation, not just in these waters but in the region writ large.

Why does it matter? From late 2023 to early 2025, a Houthi offensive hit over a hundred vessels allegedly connected to Israel, the U.S. or the UK, raising shipping costs and triggering an international military response. With navies from over fifteen nations operating in the Rea Sea, the risk of wider hostilities is high.

Executive Summary

Fresh exchanges of fire between the U.S. and the Houthis in Yemen have put Red Sea security back in the limelight. These waters had already seen an alarming rise in violence after war broke out in Gaza in October 2023. Professing support for Hamas and the Palestinian cause, Ansar Allah, a Yemeni group known as the Houthis, fired missiles and drones at Israel, at first to no avail, but then to greater effect in the second half of 2024. But the group had its biggest impact in the waters off Yemen, striking merchant vessels it claimed were at least partly owned by Israelis or headed for an Israeli port, and triggering a U.S.-led military response. The January ceasefire in Gaza stilled the Houthi campaign. But as the truce between Hamas and Israel unravelled, the Houthis said they would resume attacking Israeli-linked ships, prompting U.S. bombing of Yemeni targets.

One of the world's key commercial waterways, the Red Sea was witnessing a multinational arms race well before October 2023. Because of its strategic importance, U.S., British, European, Iranian and Indian warships routinely patrolled its waters, while a number of foreign powers sought to strike basing agreements with littoral states. The tide of militarisation may have served these powers' interests, including securing the free flow of oil and gas, in the face of piracy off the Horn of Africa and instability in the wider Middle East. But it did little to calm the troubled Red Sea. With the expanding naval deployments has come rising competition, none more bitter than that between the U.S. and Iran, each of which aspires to sabotage the other's goals.

The rise of the Houthis, who seized de facto power in much of Yemen in 2014 after deposing the interim government, added a new element of instability. Their disruptive power has been plain to see since October 2023, once they realised that they could use their growing arsenal to hold commercial shipping hostage to their political demands and, in the process, boost their domestic standing. Championing the cause of Palestinians in Gaza, whose plight has resonated widely in Yemen, helped divert attention from the failings of Houthi rule and simultaneously allowed the group to showcase its military capabilities. The maritime campaign has also helped the Houthis enlist new fighters, bolstering their ranks in anticipation that the fragile truce in Yemen's internal war, which has held since 2022, may break down. Just as importantly, it allowed them to display their commitment to the Iran-led "axis of resistance".

Until now, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and the U.S.-led military response have claimed fewer casualties than other wars in the region, but the toll on the global economy, regional security and the maritime ecosystem has been heavy. The costs of insurance and security in this shipping lane have notched up, while diversion to alternate routes (for example, around the tip of the African continent) has unsettled supply chains. In Yemen, deadlock between the emboldened Houthis and their adversaries has been cemented, with the former even less willing to strike a deal with Saudi Arabia and the internationally recognised government of Yemen, the group's longstanding foes. The attacks have also wrought environmental damage, as toxic cargoes, such as oil or chemicals, have leaked out of several targeted ships.

The Houthis repeatedly stated that ending their Red Sea campaign was conditional on Israel terminating its war in Gaza and lifting its siege of the enclave. Without doubt, the Gaza ceasefire tempered the Houthi offensive – but it never stopped it entirely. The group initially declared it was suspending attacks on Red Sea shipping, though not on vessels wholly owned by Israeli firms or flying the Israeli flag. (It shot twice at U.S. aircraft during the ceasefire.) On 12 March, citing Israel's cutoff of aid getting into Gaza during the truce, it said "any Israeli vessel" in nearby waters would be a target. The group also warned it would recommence its fire at ships flying any flag – as well as at Israeli territory – if Israel were to restart the war in Gaza. The Houthis have proven evasive as to what it might take to make them call off their campaign for good. But they evidently view Israel's resumption of war in Gaza on 18 March, following the U.S. airstrikes three days earlier, as justification for a new round of attacks on U.S. and Israel-linked ships in the Red Sea, as well as on Israel itself.

Regrettably, deepening turmoil in the Red Sea basin cannot be discounted. One factor is the Gaza war. As it has restarted, the Houthis are likely to recommence their campaign of violence at sea. They might continue their attacks in any case (though they did mostly hold their fire while the ceasefire was in effect). Much will also depend on next steps in other conflicts, including what happens with stalled talks to turn Yemen's de facto truce into a formal agreement and what moves the U.S. and Israel make in relation to the Houthis and their main ally, Iran. If tensions spike again between the U.S. and Iran, the military force unleashed by the U.S. against the Houthis as well as the response from that group and its ally in Tehran could escalate in dangerous ways.

Escalation on these fronts is likely to deepen the Houthis' perception that they have no option but to stay on a war footing in Yemen and keep harrying their adversaries with threats to commercial shipping. The likely casualty will be stability across the Red Sea basin, with effects felt worldwide.

March 2025

Calming the Red Sea's Turbulent Waters

I. Introduction

The Red Sea, which connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans to the Mediterranean Sea, and thus Asia and Africa to Europe, is a strategic body of water through which commercial shipping must have free passage. Lapping at the shores of eight countries and with chokepoints at both ends – the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal – the Red Sea is both vital to world trade and vulnerable to being blocked. Any threat to navigation there can set off a wide-ranging economic shock. Even minor disruptions, such as when the mammoth container ship, the *MV Ever Given*, got stuck in the Canal for six days in March 2021, can have repercussions felt around the globe.¹

At its southern end, the Red Sea opens into the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean through the Bab al-Mandab. Some 7 per cent of global maritime trade, carried by over 25,000 ships and valued at \$700 billion each year, passes through this strait.² Its proximity to the Gulf also makes the Bab al-Mandab the main sea route from major Middle East oil and gas fields to the West, with 6.2 million barrels of crude oil and petroleum products in transit every day.³ Europe receives about 60 per cent of its energy needs through the Bab al-Mandab. The U.S. gets a lesser but still important share of its oil through the strait, about 10 per cent (down from 20 per cent five years ago, reflecting the decline in U.S. dependence on Middle East oil for domestic use).⁴

The Suez Canal connecting the Red Sea to the Mediterranean is another crucial passage for vessels bearing oil, gas and sundry goods. About 12 per cent of global maritime trade – including 40 per cent of container ship traffic – chugs through the Canal each year. The number of ships hit a record high of 25,900 in 2022-2023. Egypt, which controls the Canal, saw its transit fee revenues surge by 34.7 per cent to \$9.4 billion that year, up from \$7 billion in 2021-2022, due to rising oil prices and shipping companies' preference for this time-efficient route.⁵ In August 2015, Egypt launched a major expansion of the Canal, deepening the main

¹ "How one of the world's biggest ships jammed the Suez Canal", *The New York Times*, 17 July 2021. Likewise, the *FSO Safer*, a floating oil storage vessel that was listing off the Yemeni coast, might have held up global trade (and devastated the Red Sea's delicate ecosystem) had it not been salvaged in 2023. For background, see Crisis Group Statement, "How to Avert an Imminent Disaster off Yemen's Red Sea Coast", 4 July 2022.

² "The strait at the center of the world", *Politico*, 29 January 2018. This trade includes over 50 million tonnes of agricultural products. Thomas Spence, "Strategic Approaches to Maritime Chokepoints in a Globalized World – Case Studies in Bab el-Mandeb", *Floats*, 4 February 2020.

³ "The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic route for oil and natural gas shipments", U.S. Energy Information Administration, 27 August 2019.

⁴ "Middle East oil imports, at 20% of U.S. supply 5 years ago, now at 10%", *Forbes*, 28 December 2023.

⁵ Aya Hamdy, "A Surge in Revenues: Reading into the Suez Canal's Performance and Robust Growth", Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies, 6 November 2023.

waterway and digging a 35km parallel channel. The project is designed to boost revenues by enabling more and smoother traffic.⁶

Growing militarisation and, since the Gaza war broke out in October 2023, direct fire by Yemen's Houthi rebels upon commercial shipping have disrupted trade through these vital waterways. Commerce had yet to recover at the time when the Gaza ceasefire collapsed in mid-March, and all signs point to conditions worsening further. This report details the rising tensions in the strait, with a focus on the Houthi attacks. It is based on some 110 interviews conducted between November 2023 and March 2025 with experts, representatives of warring parties, decision-makers, political mediators, local and international NGO workers, businesspeople and others. Approximately 15 per cent of these interviewees were with women, reflecting the gender imbalance in positions of political, economic and social leadership in the region.

⁶ "Egypt launches Suez Canal expansion", BBC, 6 August 2015.

II. A Military High Tide

Because of their pivotal economic – and therefore strategic – importance, the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden have long been patrolled by U.S., British, European, Iranian and Indian warships, even as the armies of coastal countries jealously guard their shores. Over the past quarter-century, outside powers have bolstered their Red Sea deployments and sought to establish naval bases in littoral states. Various newcomers – notably China and the United Arab Emirates – have done the same.

A. A Scramble to Deploy

The surge in military activity over the past two decades reflects the rising competition among states for influence in the Red Sea basin and the increasing importance of the Gulf as a theatre of conflict. A series of events, such as the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, spurred Arab Gulf states to sign agreements with the U.S. and other Western powers allowing for the use of bases on their territories. Military deployments grew after the 11 September 2001 attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq. In 2002, the U.S. set up the Combined Maritime Forces, a coalition of 46 states committed to combating terrorism and piracy on the high seas.⁷

The U.S., which has the largest deployment in the Middle East of any state from outside the region, views its military presence as crucial for preserving its economic interests and for supporting its regional allies, especially Israel, while countering Iran and, more recently, China.⁸ Today, more than 40,000 U.S. troops are stationed across the region, with Bahrain, the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait hosting large U.S. bases.⁹ Conversely, Iran seeks the departure of U.S. naval forces, seeing them as a threat to its security and that of its allies, and is overtly hostile to Israel.¹⁰ Prior to the spate of Houthi attacks on shipping, rivalry between Iran and Israel underpinned a series of incidents in the region, with Israel striking at least twelve Iranian vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden since 2019, saying they were carrying Iranian oil to Syria, which at the time was part of Tehran's "axis of resistance".¹¹ In February 2021, an Israeli cargo ship sailing in the Gulf of Oman, *MV Helios Ray*, sustained an attack that Israel attributed to Iran.¹²

⁷ U.S. Naval Forces Central Command website.

⁸ "Fear that China rules the waves jolts U.S. to pursue maritime revival", *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 December 2024.

⁹ "How many US troops are in the Middle East?", Associated Press, 3 October 2024.

¹⁰ "Iran slams US military presence in Middle East as threat to stability", *China Daily*, 4 November 2024.

¹¹ "Israeli strikes target Iranian oil bound for Syria", *Wall Street Journal*, 11 March 2021.

¹² From 2018 through the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024, Israel repeatedly struck Syrian ports to disrupt Iran's maritime supply lines. Israel-Iran tensions manifested in cyberattacks as well, with each country accusing each other of targeting its assets. In 2020, Iran reportedly breached Israeli water systems, while Israel reportedly conducted cyber operations that discombobulated Iranian shipping logistics. Farzin Nadmi, "Iran and Israel's Undeclared War at Sea (Part 2): The Potential for Military Escalation", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 13 April 2021; "6 facilities said hit in Iran's cyberattack on Israel's water system in April", *Times of Israel*, 19 May 2020; and J.D. Work and Richard Harknett, "Troubled Vision: Understanding Recent Israeli-Iranian Offensive Cyber Exchanges", Atlantic Council, 22 July 2020.

Well before such tensions peaked in the Red Sea, the threat of piracy played a major role in drawing foreign navies into its waters. Somali pirates and armed groups such as al-Shabaab have common interests, with the latter profiting from piracy by imposing taxes on raids mounted from coastline it controls.¹³ In return, the Islamist group has long allowed pirates to operate freely. Faced with a growing number of pirate attacks in the Gulf of Aden, off the Horn of Africa and in the Indian Ocean in 2008, the U.S. and other NATO members bulked up their naval deployments. NATO launched Operation Ocean Shield in August 2009, with the aim of safeguarding cargo vessels from piracy.¹⁴ In February 2011, U.S. President Barack Obama authorised the use of force against Somali pirates who had killed four U.S. citizens in the Indian Ocean.¹⁵ The EU, for its part, launched its first maritime mission, Atalanta, in 2008, to protect commercial shipping routes in the north-western Indian Ocean.¹⁶

Increasing instability prompted several outsiders to redouble efforts to secure basing rights in countries lying on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Djibouti alone hosts U.S., French, Chinese, Japanese and Italian bases, and it has agreed that Saudi Arabia can build one, too, along with a major logistics zone.¹⁷ Israel has a base in Eritrea's Dahlak archipelago, from which it monitors the Bab al-Mandab and gathers intelligence on Red Sea military activity, especially Iran's.¹⁸ Iran had a base in Eritrea before Asmara halted the arrangement in 2015, letting the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen establish an operational centre instead.¹⁹ Russia, for its part, reportedly reached an agreement with Sudan in February to set up a naval base in Port Sudan.²⁰

The UAE, meanwhile, is a relative newcomer but has enlarged its footprint in the Red Sea basin in recent years to project power into Africa as well as into Yemen's coastal areas.²¹ It established its first base on the African coast at Assab, Eritrea, including a port and a military training ground, in September 2015, but dismantled the facilities in 2021.²² In 2019, after withdrawing most of its forces from mainland Yemen, it began building an airfield on Mayoun, a Yemeni island in the Bab al-Mandab, but stopped work in late 2022 when Saudi Arabia muscled its

¹³ "Pirates and terrorists are working together now in Somalia", Vox, 13 July 2017.

¹⁴ "Counter-piracy Operations (2008-2016)", NATO, 19 May 2022.

¹⁵ "Four Americans killed by Somali pirates", SBC News, 23 February 2011.

¹⁶ "EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta", European External Action Service.

¹⁷ "Djibouti finalizing pact soon for Saudi military base", Al Arabiya, 18 January 2017; and "Saudi Arabia establishes logistics zone in Djibouti to expand economic presence in Africa", Arab News, 5 June 2024.

¹⁸ "Both Iran and Israel have military bases in Eritrea, global intel reports", Haaretz, 12 December 2012.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Eritrean expert, Doha, October 2024; and Eritrean former diplomat, Amman, December 2024. See also "Iran's quest for foreign naval bases", The New Arab, 24 January 2017.

²⁰ See "Sudan says it has agreed deal for Russian naval base", Financial Times, 12 February 2025; and "Russian naval base in Sudan: Extending Moscow's influence in Middle East and North Africa", Eurasia Daily Monitor, 25 November 2020. The facility is at the Sudanese armed forces' Flamingo Naval Base just north of Port Sudan.

²¹ Eleonora Ardemagni, "The UAE's Rising Military Role in Africa: Defending Interests, Advancing Influence", Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 6 May 2024.

²² "UAE dismantles Eritrea base as it pulls back after Yemen war", Associated Press, 18 February 2021.

way in to supplant it. The UAE also established a base on Socotra, a Yemeni island that sits at the entry of the Gulf of Aden, and another at Somaliland's port of Berbera.²³

Red Sea littoral states, meanwhile, have a strong interest in keeping the waters calm to allow for trade. Egypt, which has some twenty ports on the Red Sea, maintains military bases there to shield its interests from the effects of conflicts in Yemen and Somalia; it has also joined U.S.-led naval missions and undertaken a major military modernisation effort with a significant naval component.²⁴ Saudi Arabia has the longest Red Sea coastline, and its oil industry as well as its ambitions to diversify its economy hinge on freedom of navigation and stability in the Red Sea basin.²⁵ Riyadh has expended considerable diplomatic effort to protect Red Sea shipping, which is crucial for enabling oil exports to flow freely and carrying out the mega-projects that are part of Saudi Vision 2030.²⁶ It has also worked since 2020 to establish a multilateral body that would help secure the economic interests of the countries around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.²⁷

B. *The Yemen War*

The Houthis' rise in Yemen has accelerated the Red Sea's militarisation. After seizing the capital, Sanaa, in September 2014, the rebel group quickly took control of the Red Sea coast as well. Capturing Hodeida, the deep-water port that handles over 60 per cent of Yemen's imports, enabled the Houthis to secure an external supply route for themselves while cutting off their enemies. But the Red Sea push

²³ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni observer in Al-Urdi on the Red Sea coast, 14 January 2024; Saudi expert, Riyadh, 17 January 2024. See also Abdullah Babood, "Seas, Checks and Guns: Emirati and Saudi Maritime Interests in the Yemen Conflict", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 March 2023. "Somaliland agrees to UAE military base in Berbera", BBC, 13 February 2017. The UAE has reportedly also constructed an airfield on Yemen's Abd al-Kuri island. Initiated in 2021, the project made little progress until recently. As of 23 December 2024, 1,800m of the projected 2,400m runway had been completed. Once finished, the field is expected to accommodate various aircraft, including fighter jets, maritime reconnaissance planes and heavy transports. "Mysterious airfield in Gulf of Aden is nearly complete", *The Maritime Executive*, 1 January 2025.

²⁴ Andreu Sola-Martin, "Ports, military bases and treaties: Who's who in the Red Sea", *The Africa Report*, 13 November 2020.

²⁵ Saudi Vision 2030, launched in 2016, aims to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy and enhance its social and cultural development.

²⁶ During the battle for Hodeida in 2018, Riyadh pushed for a ceasefire with the Houthis to avoid destabilising the Red Sea (and to prevent the UAE-backed Yemeni fighters encircling Hodeida from gaining influence near the Saudi Arabian border). It pressed the Yemeni government to accept the Stockholm Agreement with the Houthis to achieve its objectives. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°203, *Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen*, 18 July 2019.

²⁷ In January 2020, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Egypt, Yemen and Jordan signed the charter of the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in Riyadh. The council remains inactive, however, because Riyadh is reluctant to launch it while the situation in Yemen remains fragile, preferring to first end the war. Member states have also been slow to coordinate their efforts. Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian diplomats, Cairo, October 2024; African Union official, Brussels, April 2024. "Foreign minister: The Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden is a joint action system for coordination and cooperation", Saudi Press Agency, 6 January 2020.

had other benefits as well. With missiles aimed at the Bab al-Mandab, the Houthis could, in effect, hold international shipping hostage to their political demands.²⁸

The Red Sea has been a key theatre in the war between the Houthis and the coalition Saudi Arabia formed to restore the Yemeni government that the rebels ousted from Sanaa. One of the coalition's first acts in 2015 was to impose a maritime blockade in an effort to starve the group of supplies. It also aimed to dislodge the group from Hodeida, but it never succeeded in doing so.²⁹ In late 2017, Yemeni allies of the UAE, a coalition member, marched up the Red Sea coast on the advice of Emirati commanders and with Emirati air support, eventually encircling the city. The Houthis threatened to attack Saudi and Emirati ships in the Red Sea if the offensive continued.³⁰ Eventually, U.S. diplomatic intervention forced the coalition to halt a ground assault on Hodeida in 2018, out of concern about the humanitarian disaster that fighting for the port would cause.³¹ In December 2018, the Houthis and the government, backed by the Saudi-led coalition, signed the Stockholm Agreement, halting hostilities in Hodeida.³² By November 2021, UAE-backed forces withdrew from areas along the coast, letting the Houthis move in.³³

Attacks by the Houthis on targets at sea began in July 2018, when they struck what they thought was a Saudi military barge (the Saudis claimed it was an oil tanker) in the Bab al-Mandab, causing slight damage.³⁴ In December 2020, they fired at the *Rhine*, a tanker anchored at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, leading to the Red Sea port's temporary closure.³⁵ In the same month, mines laid by the Houthis detonated near a ship off Saudi Arabia and a cargo vessel off the small Yemeni port of Nishtun on the Indian Ocean.³⁶ Weeks later, the Houthis attacked a Greek tanker in Saudi Arabia's al-Shuqaiq port.³⁷ In January 2022, they hijacked an Emirati cargo

²⁸ In late 2016, Iran deployed the *MV Savis*, a merchant vessel owned by Iran Shipping Lines, to the Red Sea, reportedly to serve as an intelligence and weapons storage facility for the Houthis off the Yemeni coast. "Iran ship said to be Red Sea troop base off Yemen attacked", Associated Press, 7 April 2021.

²⁹ "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen (S/2021/79)", UN Security Council, 22 January 2021.

³⁰ "Yemen's Houthi rebels threaten to attack Saudi tankers", *The Maritime Executive*, 14 November 2017.

³¹ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°59, *Yemen: Averting a Destructive Battle for Hodeida*, 11 June 2018; and Peter Salisbury, "Five Steps to Save Yemen's Stockholm Agreement", Crisis Group Commentary, 15 January 2019.

³² Ibid. Fighting was curtailed in Hodeida following the deal. The agreement also included provisions for a prisoner swap and the reopening of roads in Taiz, but progress on both points stalled. Ibrahim Jalal, "Yemen's Stockholm Agreement one year on: Imaginary progress?", The Middle East Institute, 22 January 2020.

³³ "Statement issued by the Joint Forces on the West Coast", Media Centre of the Giants Brigades, 12 November 2021 [Arabic].

³⁴ "Houthi fighters attack Saudi ship off Yemen's coast", Al Jazeera, 25 July 2018; and "Saudi Arabia suspends oil exports through Bab al-Mandeb", Al Jazeera, 26 July 2018.

³⁵ Jeddah is particularly important for Saudi Arabia, which is trying to transform the Red Sea city into a premier tourist destination. Frequent Houthi attacks could drive away investors and visitors crucial to this project's viability. "Red Sea tensions threaten Saudi mega-project", VOA, 10 February 2024.

³⁶ "External source' causes oil tanker blast off Saudi Arabia", Associated Press, 15 December 2020.

³⁷ "Oil tanker hit by blast at Saudi terminal, Saudi Arabia confirms", Reuters, 25 November 2020.

ship, the *Rawabi*, off Hodeida.³⁸ In addition to mines, the Houthis used unmanned aerial vehicles (drones), ballistic missiles and unmanned boats (sea drones) on various occasions in these attacks, in some instances wounding crew members on the targeted vessels.

From 2022 onward, Yemen's battlelines increasingly shifted from the mainland to the maritime domain. A surge in Houthi cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia convinced the various Yemeni factions supported either by Saudi Arabia or the UAE to agree to a truce with the Houthis in April 2022. Although the formal truce expired six months later, in practice it remains in effect to this day.³⁹

Today's map of territorial control in Yemen reflects the stalemate after nearly a decade of conflict between the Houthis and their opponents, now assembled under the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) government. The Houthis administer approximately 28 per cent of Yemen, including Sanaa and other densely populated regions. Their rule has been heavy-handed, particularly since they killed their erstwhile ally, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in late 2017. Government-aligned factions, for their part, are united by fierce opposition to the Houthis but otherwise divided. They hold around 72 per cent of Yemen, mostly areas that are less populous than those under the Houthis' thumb.

Economic hardship in Houthi-controlled areas, where most public servants have gone without salaries since 2016, prompted the group to engage in further talks with Riyadh following the truce. These discussions made good progress over the course of 2023, with Saudi and Houthi representatives paying a series of visits to Sanaa and Riyadh, respectively, resulting in a preliminary roadmap to end the war in Yemen.⁴⁰ The first phase, aimed at collecting oil revenues from across the country in state coffers and resuming public-sector salary payments, was expected to begin by the end of the year. Rollout of the plan was frozen, however, following the outbreak of war in Gaza and the ensuing Houthi attacks on Israel and Red Sea shipping.

Along Yemen's Red Sea shore, meanwhile, a standoff persists between the Houthis and their foes. Units known as the Joint Forces, which are allied with the PLC, are positioned along the south-western coast. They include the Giants Brigades (al-Amalaqa) and the Tihama Resistance.⁴¹ Another component is the National Resistance Forces (also known as the Guards of the Republic), led by General Tariq Saleh, deputy PLC chairman and nephew of the late president. Ships under Saleh's command prowl among the Hanish islands off the town of Mokha, where he has his Red Sea headquarters. For their part, the Houthis have fortified naval

³⁸ "Houthi seize 'hostile' vessel off Yemen that Saudis say carried medical equipment", Reuters, 3 January 2022.

³⁹ Ahmed Nagi, "Catching Up on the Back-channel Peace Talks in Yemen", Crisis Group Commentary, 10 October 2023.

⁴⁰ The provisional roadmap – negotiated before 7 October 2023, but never concluded – would have had three phases. In the first phase, the parties were to commit to respecting a nationwide ceasefire, paying all public-sector salaries, resuming oil exports and further easing restrictions on Sanaa airport and Hodeida port. In the second phase, they were to address military and economic arrangements, such as unifying the currency and the two parallel central banks, while the third phase was to centre on a Yemeni-led political process under UN auspices. See "Update on Efforts to Secure a UN Roadmap to End the War in Yemen", Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 23 December 2023.

⁴¹ "Yemen Conflict Observatory: Joint Forces on the West Coast", Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), 31 January 2014.

facilities on Kamaran, Zuqar and smaller islands near Hodeida to protect the port city.⁴²

The onset of Houthi attacks at sea prompted the U.S. to ramp up its naval presence. In April 2022, working with Egypt and Italy, the U.S. established the Combined Task Force 153 – Red Sea Maritime Security (CTF-153), tasked with policing the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandab and Gulf of Aden from a base in Bahrain, with a particular focus on deterring Houthi strikes on shipping and interdicting shipments of arms being smuggled to the group.⁴³ After Egypt announced in December 2022 that it would assume (rotating) command of CTF-153 operations, including in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, the Houthis ratcheted up their response.⁴⁴ The group installed radar equipment to track CTF-153 vessels' movements and threatened to fire upon any one of them approaching Yemeni waters, bespeaking a shift from land to sea in the Houthis' military posture.⁴⁵ The Houthi-controlled government's defence minister in Sanaa said securing Yemen's maritime borders would henceforth be his top priority.⁴⁶

⁴² Crisis Group telephone interviews, military experts based in Yemen, February 2024.

⁴³ The CTF-153 is the fourth task force established under the Combined Maritime Forces. U.S. Naval Forces Central Command website.

⁴⁴ "Egypt takes command of the Joint Task Force 153", press release, Egyptian Armed Forces, 13 December 2022. Egypt held this command from 12 December 2022 until 12 June 2023. "CTF 153: Red Sea Maritime Security", Combined Maritime Forces website. "The defence minister's visit to Kamaran island affirms Yemen's readiness to confront any plans of the aggressor forces in the Red Sea", *al-Masira*, 30 April 2023 [Arabic].

⁴⁵ The shift involves maintaining low-intensity fighting on land while concentrating on fortifying coastal areas and islands under the group's control. Alongside advanced radar systems, the Houthis use patrol boats, some of them remote-controlled, and sea mines. They have also strengthened ties with armed factions in the Horn of Africa to expand their influence and gather intelligence on shipping movements in the region.

⁴⁶ "The Yemeni defence minister from the western coastal front: The Yemeni people have the right to protect the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandab and Gulf of Aden", *al-Manar*, 22 April 2023 [Arabic].

III. War in Gaza and the Houthi Offensive

Triggered by Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack on Israel, the war in Gaza set off a major escalation of violence in the Red Sea region, as the Houthis entered the fray in professed solidarity with the Palestinians, especially Hamas, its ally in the Iran-led "axis of resistance". Consistent with their pronouncements, the Houthis ceased their attacks during short-lived truces between Israel and Hamas in November 2023 and again in January-March 2025, then resumed them once these ceasefires crumbled. The failure of repeated massive airstrikes by U.S.-led forces and Israel to suppress the Houthis' fire throws serious doubt on the possibility of a military solution that halts the Red Sea confrontation for good.

A. *The Houthis Escalate*

In response to the onset of war in Gaza, the Houthis first launched drones and missiles at Israel, to little effect. Their next, far more consequential step was to pursue commercial vessels in the Red Sea and, later, the Gulf of Aden that they claimed were at least partly Israeli-owned or carrying cargo to an Israeli port. These actions made shipping in these waterways increasingly hazardous and prompted a muscular response from the U.S. and its allies, setting in motion a cycle of strike and counterstrike. In July 2024, the Houthis sent an exploding drone into Tel Aviv that killed one person and injured several others. The Israeli air force responded by hitting oil and gas facilities in Hodeida. After hostilities ratcheted up between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon in September, the Houthis intensified their fire at targets in Israel. In December, the group launched over fifteen projectiles.⁴⁷ Several reached central Israel, causing major damage to buildings.⁴⁸

The origin of the Houthi offensive can be traced to the days after Israel began its retaliatory bombardment of Gaza. On 19 October 2023, the group aimed four armed drones at Eilat in southern Israel, claiming to be acting in solidarity with the Palestinian people and Hamas.⁴⁹ Israeli air defences shot them down. On the next occasion, the group's drones landed in Egypt and Jordan, close to those countries' borders with Israel. The Houthis also fired four ballistic missiles at Israel, but Saudi Arabia intercepted these before they could reach their targets.⁵⁰ At first,

⁴⁷ On 29 September 2024, Israel bombed Hodeida port in response to Houthi missile attacks on Israel the previous day. "Israeli army launches air raids on Yemen's Ras Isa and Hodeida", Al Jazeera, 29 September 2024.

⁴⁸ The Houthis claim to have conducted as many as 27 attacks that month. "Houthi group carried out 27 military operations against Israel in December", *Middle East Monitor*, 1 January 2025. "Briefing on Developments related to Houthi Attacks on Israel", *Security Council Report*, 29 December 2024.

⁴⁹ Tweet by Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sareea, @army21ye, 31 October 2023, speaking after the third Houthi attack against Israel that month. See also "Yemen's Houthi rebels claim attacks on Israel, drawing their main sponsor Iran closer to Hamas war", Associated Press, 1 November 2023.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Houthi official, December 2023. Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthis' political bureau, criticised Saudi Arabia for this action. Tweet by Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, @M_N_AlBukhaiti, 2 November 2023. Saudi officials said Riyadh had acted to protect Saudi Arabian airspace – and would do so again, regardless of the missiles'

the Houthis did not acknowledge responsibility.⁵¹ But in a later statement, they said they had been aiming at the Israeli city of Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba; subsequently, they launched a barrage of dozens of drones and cruise missiles (which the Houthis call “winged missiles”). The U.S. and Israel knocked down most of these projectiles, at significant cost, but a few caused minor damage in Eilat.⁵²

Houthi attempts to strike Israeli territory remained largely ineffectual, prompting the group to step up operations in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden instead.⁵³ On 14 November 2023, Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi threatened to hit Israeli vessels in these waters.⁵⁴ A Houthi representative said, “Targeting Israeli ships in the Red Sea was intended to show Israel and its allies that Yemen will not remain silent during the aggression on Gaza and can target Israeli and its allies’ interests anywhere in the region”.⁵⁵ Confirming the shift in tactics, the group made a dramatic move five days after Abdul-Malik’s remarks: Houthi fighters seized the *MV Galaxy Leader*, a vessel partly owned by an Israeli businessman, diverting it to Hodeida and detaining its multinational crew.⁵⁶

Since first training their guns on ships with alleged links to Israel, the Houthis have steadily expanded their campaign. In a second phase, they started firing on U.S. and British warships providing protection to vessels supposedly owned by Israelis. The response to these attacks from the U.S. and its Western allies (see Section IV.A below) prompted a third phase, in which the Houthis struck not only warships but also U.S. and British commercial vessels they suspected of heading to Israeli ports.⁵⁷ As Israel invaded Rafah, Gaza’s southernmost city, in May 2024, the Houthis announced a fourth phase, shooting at any commercial ship, regardless of nationality, that they believed was heading to Israel. They also began attacking ships in the Gulf of Aden and as distant from Yemen as the Indian Ocean.⁵⁸

In the past year and a half, the Houthis have struck a great number of commercial vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden despite vigorous counterstrikes by the U.S. and other Western nations. As of 18 January, they had launched 472 attacks

provenance. Crisis Group telephone interview, Saudi security expert, December 2023. See also “Saudi forces on alert after clash with Iran-backed Houthis”, Bloomberg, 30 October 2023.

⁵¹ “Will Yemen’s Houthis try to strike Israel?”, *The New Arab*, 23 October 2023.

⁵² “Houthis Target Israel Amid Gaza Conflict”, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 20 November 2023.

⁵³ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Houthi official, November 2023.

⁵⁴ “Yemen’s Houthis leader says group will target Israeli ships in Red Sea”, Reuters, 14 November 2023.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2024. The Houthis portray themselves as the legitimate representatives of Yemen, asserting that the Yemeni army is mounting the Red Sea attacks. The internationally recognised Yemeni government, nominally based in Aden, strongly opposes the Houthis’ strikes on international shipping. “President al-Alimi: Houthi militia’s escalation in the Red Sea aims to elude peace”, press release, Yemeni Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, 12 January 2024.

⁵⁶ “Seized *Galaxy Leader* ship in Yemen’s Hodeidah port area”, Reuters, 21 November 2023. As of 22 January, the Houthis had released the *Galaxy Leader*’s crew but not the ship or its cargo. “Yemen’s Houthis free crew of Red Sea cargo ship after 14 months in captivity”, CNN, 22 January 2025.

⁵⁷ “Escalation Stage Four: Four Elements and Four Implications”, Ansar Allah, 4 May 2024 [Arabic].

⁵⁸ “Houthis threaten to expand range of targets in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden”, USNI News, 6 May 2024; and “Saree: Yemen has launched phase four of escalation in support of Gaza”, *al-Maya-deen*, 14 May 2024.

on shipping and on Israel, and hit more than a hundred ships in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea, sinking two: the *MV Rubymar*, a Belize-flagged, UK-owned cargo ship carrying 21,000 tonnes of chemical fertiliser, and the *MV Tutor*, a Liberia-flagged, Greek-owned bulk coal vessel.⁵⁹ The Houthis attacked another vessel, the Greek-registered *MV Sounion*, a tanker bearing 150,000 tonnes of crude oil, in August 2024. An oil spill could easily have resulted, but a European salvage operation brought the *Sounion* to a safe location.⁶⁰ Other ships sustained damage, sometimes heavy, resulting in the deaths of three sailors and injuries to several others.⁶¹

Attacks in the Red Sea have also interfered with global communications. In March 2024, three undersea internet cables were cut in circumstances that remain unclear, triggering alarm that the Houthis had done the deed.⁶² The group denied involvement, but Houthi leaders had previously threatened to sever the lines if fighting were to escalate with the U.S. or Israel.⁶³ The disruption hit around 25 per cent of the internet traffic passing beneath the Red Sea, affecting countries in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa and Europe.⁶⁴

The Houthis have sought Russian backing for their actions, courting Moscow throughout 2024, though to what avail is unclear. Senior Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdelsalam held at least three meetings with the Russian president's special representative for the Middle East and Africa, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, focusing on developments in the Red Sea.⁶⁵ The Houthis reportedly assured Russia (as well as China) that their vessels could pass through these waters unimpeded, in return for promises of support in diplomatic forums, such as the UN Security Council.⁶⁶ In January 2024, Russia and China abstained when the Security Council passed a resolution condemning Houthi attacks on cargo ships in

⁵⁹ "Yemen Conflict Observatory: Red Sea Attacks Dashboard", ACLED; "Maritime Incidents Tracker", The Washington Institute, 20 December 2024; and "Houthis believed to have sunk second ship, the *Tutor*, in the Red Sea", Reuters, 19 June 2024. The Houthis said they had attacked more than 200 ships by November 2024. "Houthis target Israel, US responds by targeting Hodeida", *Yemen Monitor*, 31 December 2024.

⁶⁰ "MV *Sounion* tanker safe following attack in the Red Sea", press release, EUNAVFOR Operation Aspides, 26 September 2024.

⁶¹ "March 22 Red Sea Update", press release, U.S. Central Command, 22 March 2024. The U.S. said, "Illegal Houthi attacks have killed three mariners, sunk a commercial vessel lawfully transiting the Red Sea, disrupted humanitarian aid bound for Yemen, harmed Middle East economies and caused environmental damage".

⁶² "3 Red Sea data cables cut as Houthis launch more attacks in the vital waterway", Associated Press, 5 March 2024.

⁶³ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Houthi official, April 2024.

⁶⁴ The severed cables include Asia-Africa-Europe 1, the Europe India Gateway, Seacom and TGN-Gulf. "3 Red Sea data cables cut as Houthis launch more attacks in the vital waterway", op. cit.

⁶⁵ "Abdelsalam meets with the Russian president's special envoy to the Middle East and Africa", Saba News Agency, 2 July 2024 [Arabic]; and tweet by Mohammed Abdelsalam, Houthi spokesman, @abdusalsalsalah, 12:55pm, 16 December 2023 [Arabic].

⁶⁶ "Yemen's Houthis tell China, Russia their ships won't be targeted", Bloomberg, 21 March 2024.

the Red Sea.⁶⁷ That September, the U.S. accused Russia of discussing weapons transfers with the Houthis.⁶⁸ Moscow denied it.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, the Houthis have firmed up their control of the Red Sea and adjoining waters. In February 2024, the Houthis established a Humanitarian Operations Coordination Centre to strengthen oversight of Yemen's maritime space.⁷⁰ Led by senior Houthi leader Ahmed Hamid and supervised by the head of the Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat, the centre determines which companies may send ships through these waters, including the Bab al-Mandab, and communicates with commercial vessels by radio, telephone and email. Since February 2024, the Houthis have been barring certain companies from the vicinity, warning them their ships will be fired upon if attempting to pass.⁷¹ Reports suggest the group has begun collecting fees from shipping firms for safe passage through the Red Sea.⁷² The Houthis have also strengthened ties with armed groups in Somalia, reportedly with a view to launching maritime attacks from the Somali coast. Throughout 2024, the Houthis and Al-Shabaab smuggled light weapons such as AK-47 assault rifles and machine guns, as well as drones, across the Bab al-Mandab.⁷³

B. *The Houthis' Motives*

In launching attacks on Israel and Red Sea shipping, the Houthis appear to have had two things uppermost in mind. One was the opportunity to burnish their domestic image by standing up for the Palestinians in Gaza, whose plight is a matter of acute public concern across Yemen, while diverting attention from the flaws of Houthi rule. The second was the need to show commitment to their allies in the “axis of resistance”.

1. Riding a wave of support for the Palestinians

The Gaza war presented the Houthis with a welcome chance to embrace the Palestinian issue, which is a big part of their political program. The question of Palestine

⁶⁷ “Security Council strongly condemns Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping”, UN News, 10 January 2024.

⁶⁸ “US says Russia is discussing weapon transfers with Yemen's Houthis”, Al Arabiya, 26 September 2024.

⁶⁹ “After denying US accusations of arming the Houthis, Russia reiterates its support for Yemen's govt”, Yemen Online, 8 October 2024.

⁷⁰ “The President of the Political Council issues a decision to establish the Humanitarian Operations Coordination Centre”, Saba News Agency, 17 February 2024 [Arabic].

⁷¹ “Houthis' email alert to Red Sea ships: Prepare for attack, with best regards”, Reuters, 3 October 2024.

⁷² “The UNSC Panel of Experts on Yemen sources conveyed that the Houthis allegedly collected illegal fees from a few shipping agencies to allow their ships to sail through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden without being attacked. Sources further informed the Panel that these shipping agencies coordinate with a company affiliated with a top-ranking Houthi leader and that the fees are deposited in various accounts in multiple jurisdictions through the hawala network and through adjustments involving trade-based money-laundering”. “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014)”, UN Security Council, 11 October 2024.

⁷³ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Yemeni government military leader, October 2024. See also UN Security Council, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014)”, 11 October 2024.

has featured consistently in the group's public addresses since it was established in the 1990s.⁷⁴ A senior member of the Houthis' political bureau, Abdul-Malik al-Ejri, reiterated a longstanding creed in March 2024 when he said, "Confronting U.S. hegemony in the region and supporting the Palestinian cause are central issues in Ansar Allah's ideology". He sought to ground the Houthis' position in Yemeni history, citing the example of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war, when South Yemen (then an independent republic), in collaboration with Egypt, closed the Bab al-Mandab to Israeli ships carrying oil from Iran.⁷⁵

When the Gaza war broke out, the Houthis were quick to see that the Yemeni public would rally behind the Palestinians. Al-Ejri claimed, "As Yemenis, we disagree on many political issues, both internal and external, and on regional alliances. But the Palestinian cause enjoys unprecedented consensus".⁷⁶ Yemenis proved him right, with many attending weekly pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Houthi-controlled areas. True, the numbers at these demonstrations were artificially inflated, and their origins had little to do with Gaza: they began in September 2023, when the Houthis instructed disgruntled public-sector employees, who have not been receiving regular pay, to assemble each week to reaffirm their loyalty to the group.⁷⁷ In October, participants began expressing support for the Houthis' military actions against Israel as well. But the pro-Palestinian sentiment was real, and similar gatherings occurred with no element of coercion in parts of Yemen that are not under Houthi control.

Riding a wave of popular sympathy with the Palestinians, the Houthis gained credibility among both domestic and foreign audiences not just as trenchant critics of Israel but as champions of armed struggle against it.⁷⁸ Accordingly, they drew public attention to their strikes in the Red Sea, even when they missed the target or perhaps did not fire at all. In June 2024, for example, the Houthis said they had struck a U.S. aircraft carrier, the *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower*, a claim the U.S. promptly denied.⁷⁹ Likewise, the Houthis said they had launched missiles at the Israeli port city of Haifa in coordination with Iraqi paramilitary groups, but Israel has not acknowledged any such attack.⁸⁰

Whether true or not, these claims serve important purposes for the Houthis. They showcase the Houthis' capabilities to their supporters, even when the missiles go astray, while feeding a narrative of gradual escalation and demonstrating the group's indifference to possible consequences. They also help the group elevate

⁷⁴ See, for example, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°154, *The Houthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, 10 June 2014.

⁷⁵ "Athir: Is the Houthi Ansar Allah movement expanding in the Red Sea? An interview with Abdul-Malik al-Ejri", video, YouTube, 1 March 2024 [Arabic]. The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, or South Yemen, was an independent nation from 1967 until 1990, when it merged with the Republic of Yemen, or North Yemen.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Sanaa-based journalists, May 2024.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Yemeni politician with strong contacts among the Houthis, Muscat, January 2024. Since 2002, the group's main slogan – widely criticised for being blatantly anti-Semitic – has been: "God is great, death to America, death to Israel, a curse upon the Jews, victory to Islam".

⁷⁹ "Houthi claim of attack on U.S. aircraft carrier false, U.S. officials say", Reuters, 22 June 2024.

⁸⁰ "Yemen's Houthis claim missile strike on vital target in northern Israel", Anadolu Agency, 3 July 2024; and "Yemen's Houthis say they'll step up strikes on Israel in tandem with Iraqi militia", *Times of Israel*, 3 July 2024.

its standing, in effect transforming a Yemeni non-state armed outfit into a potent militant group able to challenge global powers and harm the world economy. The group's media channels have promoted Israeli and Western media statements that exaggerate its military prowess.⁸¹

The effect on Yemeni public opinion is mixed. Even the Houthis' Yemeni opponents have at times expressed grudging support for the group's attacks on Israel and Israel-linked ships. But they have done so while continuing to denounce the Houthis for deposing the legitimate government in 2014 and seeking to force their rule upon all of Yemen.⁸² Many ordinary citizens have been more critical. In Taiz, for example, a city that has been under Houthi siege since 2015, people have condemned the group's double standard – standing up for oppressed Palestinians yet oppressing Yemenis in Taiz and elsewhere.⁸³ For their part, the Houthis have demonised their rivals who are part of the PLC, saying they "do not represent the Yemeni public's position in support of Gaza. They are proving they lack legitimacy, as they back Western countries and Israel".⁸⁴

These arguments, which carry weight with parts of the population, have allowed the Houthis to deflect attention from worsening economic conditions in the areas of Yemen under their control. After the April 2022 truce, fighting tapered off and the group began negotiating a permanent ceasefire with Saudi Arabia.⁸⁵ Besides bringing relative calm to the country, the truce also let Yemenis in Houthi-controlled areas express demands for better services and payment of public-sector salaries, which the Houthis say they will postpone until their war with the Saudi-led coalition is over.⁸⁶ On 26 September 2023, days before the Gaza war began, demonstrations broke out in Sanaa and Ibb in which participants openly accused the Houthis of corruption and poor governance.⁸⁷ Abdul-Malik al-Houthi then announced "radical changes", beginning with dismissing the Houthi-affiliated government; he eventually appointed a new government a year later.⁸⁸ Popular pressure on the Houthis has nevertheless eased since then, with many Yemenis directing their anger at Israel instead.⁸⁹

⁸¹ The Houthis' outlets, including *al-Masira* and others, routinely publish articles translated into Arabic under the rubric of "enemy media". In his hour-long weekly address on 25 July 2024, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi spent over twelve minutes recounting what Israeli and U.S. newspapers had written about Houthi operations. "Speech of Sayyid Leader Abdul-Malik Badr al-Din al-Houthi on the latest local and regional developments and events 19 Muhamarram 1446 AH", *al-Masira*, 25 July 2024 [Arabic].

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni government and Southern Transitional Council (STC) officials, Aden, January 2024.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni government and STC officials, Aden and Mocha, January 2024.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Houthi official in Sanaa, November 2023.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, tribal leaders from Sanaa and Dhamar, March 2023.

⁸⁶ For many other Yemenis, the truce signified that war's end. Crisis Group interview, Central Bank (Sanaa) official, Cairo, April 2023.

⁸⁷ "Yemen's Houthi group sacks 'cabinet' amid mass protests", Xinhua, 28 September 2023.

⁸⁸ "Speech of Sayyid Leader Abdul-Malik Badr al-Din al-Houthi on the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet", *al-Masira*, 27 September 2023 [Arabic]. The caretaker government remained in place until September 2024, before the group's leader appointed a new one the same month.

⁸⁹ "Snapshot of Yemeni Public Sentiment on Red Sea Developments", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 16 October 2024.

Under the slogan of fighting Israel and its Western allies, the Houthis launched a large recruitment campaign, which has reportedly been quite successful. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi claimed in May 2024 that the group had added thousands of new fighters since the previous October, but it appears that most of the recruits have received only basic training and remain at one remove from the group's formal military forces.⁹⁰ Even so, the surge of recruitment has bolstered the Houthis' military readiness in Yemen, especially in the strategic governorates of Marib, Shabwa, al-Jawf, Taiz and al-Dhale. Previously, in the wake of the April 2022 truce, the Houthis' ranks had been thinning as fighting subsided. The Houthis may be calculating that if talks with Saudi Arabia do not resume and tensions with the U.S. and Israel rise, Yemen's internal war could pick up pace again, with their adversaries – the Yemeni government headed by the PLC – gaining fresh military support from the U.S. and its allies.⁹¹ Some of their foes have certainly seized on the Houthis' attacks on shipping to call on the U.S. to provide such aid.⁹²

The Houthis also believe that the Red Sea campaign allows them to portray themselves as Yemen's legitimate leaders, both at home and abroad. After each attack, they have brandished national symbols, such as the Yemeni flag and emblem, rather than their own logo.⁹³ By doing so, they have aimed to present themselves as the voice of Yemen and the single authority that expresses national solidarity with Gaza, in contrast to the PLC, which they portray as aligned with the U.S. and Israel.⁹⁴

2. Being a reliable ally

The second motive for the Houthis' Red Sea attacks was to reaffirm their commitment to the "axis of resistance" by acting in solidarity with Hamas and in concert with their non-state allies in Lebanon and Iraq. The Houthis broadly aligned themselves with Iran from the time of their founding in the 1990s, viewing their movement as part of a struggle against the forces represented by the U.S. and Israel, as well as Saudi Arabia. Their relationship with Iran began taking concrete form only

⁹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Sanaa-based military experts, November 2024. See also "Speech of Sayyid Leader Abdul-Malik Badr al-Din al-Houthi on the occasion of the annual anniversary of the cry in the face of the arrogant", *al-Masira*, 9 May 2024 [Arabic].

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni politician with contacts among the Houthis, Muscat, April 2024.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, senior Yemeni government, STC and Islah party officials, Aden and Riyadh, January 2024.

⁹³ See, for example, "Military statement on the targeting of the U.S. aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman", cited in a tweet by Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea, @army21ye, 9:12am, 27 December 2024 [Arabic].

⁹⁴ The Houthis have grappled with the issue of their rule's legitimacy ever since they seized Sanaa in 2014. Early on, they portrayed themselves as the rightful authority in Yemen by claiming to have led a revolution that overthrew the internationally recognised government. Later, while they were fighting the Saudi-led coalition, they justified their rule by asserting they were defending Yemen from foreign aggressors. "Houthi Media: A Study in Ideological Warfare", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, op. cit. Since 7 October 2023, they have adopted a fresh narrative by championing the Palestinian cause. Crisis Group telephone interview, Houthi senior political leader, April 2024.

after they captured Sanaa and other parts of Yemen in 2014, and particularly when the Saudi-led coalition intervened in 2015. It has grown tighter since then.⁹⁵

The Houthis acknowledged their engagement with the Iran-led axis soon after 7 October 2023. In a televised speech three days later, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi announced that the group was participating in the axis operations room to coordinate military action in the region.⁹⁶ Houthi officials explicitly stated they would halt their attacks on Israel and Israeli assets only after a Gaza ceasefire.⁹⁷ Speaking in 2024, Al-Ejri, a senior member of the Houthis' political bureau, detailed the extent of intra-axis cooperation.⁹⁸ While it had existed before 7 October 2023, he said, it "has increased since Hamas's al-Aqsa Flood operation [that day], and communication is ongoing at both the political and military levels".⁹⁹

Relations between the Houthis and Iran go further than collaboration in the Gaza war. Iran has been the group's main outside supporter, providing it with weapons, intelligence and expertise.¹⁰⁰ A U.S. intelligence agency claims that Iran has sent more arms to the Houthis since 7 October 2023, shipping them either straight to Yemen or through smugglers in the Horn of Africa.¹⁰¹ In addition, ship tracking data indicate that at least 78 Iranian fishing boats suspected of carrying weapons for the Houthis entered Yemeni waters between 1 October 2023 and 29 February 2024.¹⁰² The real number may be higher: more such Iranian vessels were in international waters east of the Arabian Sea in that five-month period than ever before.¹⁰³ The Yemeni government has accused the Houthis of using Hodeida as the main entry point for Iranian weapons shipments, especially after the Saudi-led coalition lifted restrictions on the port in March 2023.¹⁰⁴ The Houthis reject these allegations, claiming that while they benefit from the expertise of Iran and Hezbollah, they manufacture all their weapons themselves in Yemen.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁵ See, *inter alia*, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°167, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, 9 February 2016.

⁹⁶ "Leader of the revolution: If the U.S. intervenes directly in Palestine, we are ready to participate in missile strikes and marches", Saba News Agency, 10 October 2023 [Arabic].

⁹⁷ "Yemen's Houthis 'will not stop' Red Sea attacks until Israel ends Gaza war", Al Jazeera, 19 December 2023.

⁹⁸ "Mohammad al-Deif, the military spokesman of the Qassam Brigades, requested help and support from resistance movements, particularly in Yemen. Responding to this call was essential for us. Ansar Allah [as the Houthis call their movement], or Yemen, is part of the resistance axis, and this made it difficult not to respond". "Athir: Is the Houthi Ansar Allah movement expanding in the Red Sea? An interview with Abdul-Malik al-Ejri", op. cit.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen", UN Security Council Document S/2021/79, 25 January 2021; and "Iranian and Hezbollah commanders help direct Houthi attacks in Yemen", Reuters, 21 January 2024.

¹⁰¹ "Seized at Sea: Iranian Weapons Smuggled to the Houthis", U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, 30 April 2024; and "Investigative report: Iranian arms smuggling to the Houthis has increased since early October. Was Iran preparing for the Red Sea battle?", *Akhbar al-Yaman al-An*, 2 July 2024 [Arabic].

¹⁰² See the Global Fishing Watch website.

¹⁰³ "Investigative report: Iranian arms smuggling to the Houthis has increased since early October. Was Iran preparing for the Red Sea battle?", op. cit.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni government officials, Cairo, April 2023. See also "Saudi Arabia Eases Import Restrictions at Yemeni Ports", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, April 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, Sanaa-based senior Houthi official, May 2024.

Beginning in the first half of 2024, the Houthis stepped up their communication with other axis members. Mohammed Abdelsalam, head of the Houthis' negotiating team, has met several times with the former Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian (since deceased) and his replacement Abbas Araghchi in Muscat, and visited Tehran in December 2023 and May and July 2024.¹⁰⁶ In Beirut, Houthi representatives spoke with Palestinian groups, including Hamas, to coordinate operations, according to a Houthi journalist.¹⁰⁷ In Iraq, the Houthi representative, Abu Idrees al-Sharafi, has frequently met with Iran-backed Iraqi paramilitary groups. The Houthis and these groups have carried out joint drone and missile attacks on suspected Israeli ships in the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁸

As a result, the Houthis have transcended their standing as a Yemeni non-state group with a strictly domestic agenda to become an actor with regional, if still limited, reach. In intensifying their attacks on Israel following Israel's near-demolition of Hizbollah and Hamas, the collapse of the Syrian regime in December 2024 and the weakening of Iran's defences, the Houthis may also have aimed to demonstrate that, despite these setbacks for the axis, they remained strong.

The group's evolution suggests that even if a permanent ceasefire in Gaza is eventually achieved, it may seek to continue the Red Sea attacks in pursuit of its own interests in Yemen or across the Middle East. It is possible that the Houthis would dial down the frequency of strikes on shipping but keep military assets stationed along Yemen's coast so that they can scale them back up if they wish. By capitalising on Yemen's location overlooking the Bab al-Mandab, they have discovered that they can gain leverage by inflicting economic harm on nations dependent on the waterway for the transshipment of cargo. With deep mistrust persisting between the Houthis and the U.S. and its allies, and with the future of conflicts in Yemen and the broader region uncertain, the group could resume or even escalate strikes at will as a way to put pressure on its adversaries.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Sanaa-based senior Houthi official, April 2024. See also "Mohammed Abdelsalam meets with the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council", 26 September, 31 December 2023 [Arabic].

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, Beirut-based Houthi journalist, March 2024.

¹⁰⁸ "Houthi military spokesman statement", cited in a tweet by Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea, @army21ye, 8:00am, 3 December 2024; and "Joint operations with the Iraqi resistance are a real terror for the Western system", Ansar Allah, 16 July 2024 [Arabic].

IV. A Volatile Conflict in the Red Sea

A sustained campaign of counterstrikes by the U.S. and UK failed to bring an end to the Houthi offensive. Following announcement of the Gaza ceasefire deal in January, however, the group said it would suspend its attacks in the Red Sea on condition that the truce in Gaza remained intact and the U.S. and UK halted their strikes; it also said the suspension would not extend to Israel-linked vessels (though, in the event, it mostly held its fire while the truce was in place).¹⁰⁹ Subsequent events – including the Houthis' threat after Israel cut off the entry of aid into Gaza on 2 March that it would recommence attacks on Israel-linked ships, the 15 March retaliatory U.S. airstrikes, the Gaza ceasefire's end on 18 March and Houthi missile launches at Israel later that day – have underlined the precariousness of any pause in fighting and borne out the fears of many shipping companies, which deem the situation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden too unstable and the future too uncertain for trade to resume.

A. The U.S. Strikes Back

The U.S. and its allies responded to the initial Houthi escalation with a multi-pronged campaign of airstrikes, legal measures and back-channel diplomacy. On 18 December 2023, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced Operation Prosperity Guardian, to be run by a force composed of warships from ten countries with interests in the Red Sea. Its mission was to end what Austin called “the blockade” the Houthis had, in effect, imposed and “to counter threats by Houthi forces against international maritime commerce in the region”.¹¹⁰

The naval campaign was defensive at first, limited to protecting commercial vessels, but it rapidly evolved to include an offensive side. For roughly two months, the U.S. and its allies sought only to intercept Houthi armed drones, ballistic missiles and unmanned vessels, while avoiding more aggressive countermeasures that might have risked severing vital shipping lanes.¹¹¹ But on 31 December 2023, the U.S. sank four Houthi attack boats, killing the combined crew of ten.¹¹² Days later, on 11-12 January 2024, the U.S. and UK launched their first overtly offensive operation inside Yemen, dubbed Poseidon Archer, consisting of nighttime airstrikes on Houthi installations that they alleged the group had used to stage its Red Sea attacks.¹¹³ Targets included radar sites, launchpads and arms depots in Hodeida, Hajja, Sanaa, Taiz, Saada, Dhamar and Rayma.

¹⁰⁹ “Houthis to halt Israel, Red Sea attacks if Gaza truce comes into force”, Al Jazeera, 18 January 2025.

¹¹⁰ “Statement from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea”, U.S. Department of Defense, 18 December 2023. The U.S. thus extended the mandate of CTF-153 to include countering Houthi attacks.

¹¹¹ Alexandra Stark, “Don’t Bomb the Houthis: Careful Diplomacy Can Stop the Attacks in the Red Sea”, *Foreign Affairs*, 11 January 2024.

¹¹² “US navy helicopters fire at Yemen’s Houthi rebels and kill several in latest Red Sea shipping attack”, Associated Press, 1 January 2024.

¹¹³ The U.S. described Operations Prosperity Guardian and Poseidon Archer as defensive measures aimed at curtailing the Houthis' ability to attack military and commercial vessels. “It’s a defensive coalition meant to reassure global shipping and mariners that the international community is there to help with safe passage”, said Austin. “Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J.

These offensive operations appear not to have had the desired effect. Houthi sources say the U.S. and UK carried out 931 airstrikes in 2024, killing dozens of the group's fighters.¹¹⁴ Yet the group claims that these strikes did little to weaken its military capability.¹¹⁵ Likewise, Yemeni government military officers noted in January 2024 that U.S.-British bombardment to that point had been of little practical value in deterring Houthi attacks.¹¹⁶ Various reasons lie behind its failure. For a start, the group had dispersed its military positions and mobile weaponry after years of airstrikes by Saudi-led coalition members. U.S. intelligence as to Houthi military assets appears to have been less than abundant. But most important may have been that the Houthis were willing to absorb the blows in pursuit of their Red Sea campaign's motives (see Section III.B above).

The U.S. has also turned to other methods to exert pressure on the Houthis, including imposing fresh sanctions and redesignating the group as a "terrorist organisation".¹¹⁷ In January 2021, President Joe Biden had reversed his predecessor's decision to list the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, out of concern about the consequences for humanitarian aid and efforts to reach a ceasefire.¹¹⁸ Three years later, however, in response to the attacks in the Red Sea, his administration reclassified the group as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. This sanction is less severe than an FTO designation under U.S. law, as it does not trigger application of the statute that makes material support for designated groups a crime.¹¹⁹ The Biden administration said it would remove the designation if the Houthis ceased firing at Red Sea targets.¹²⁰

Lastly, the U.S. looked to negotiations to contain the conflict. Starting in November 2023, it engaged in back-channel talks with the Houthis, facilitated by Oman, to persuade them to halt their attacks.¹²¹ The following January, Muscat also hosted indirect talks between Iran and the U.S. about Red Sea tensions, with the aim of getting Tehran to press the Houthis to stand down.¹²² The U.S. tried to rally other countries behind the same objective. In January 2024, when former

Austin III's Call with French Minister of the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu", U.S. Department of Defense, 21 December 2023.

¹¹⁴ "Weekly speech of Leader Abdul-Malik Badr al-Din al-Houthi", Ansar Allah, 2 January 2025 [Arabic].

¹¹⁵ "Do the American and British strikes on the Houthis in Yemen herald the expansion of the conflict in the Middle East?", Radio Monte Carlo International, 13 January 2024 [Arabic].

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, member of the government military negotiating committee, Riyadh, 18 January 2024.

¹¹⁷ Many senior Houthi officials, including leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, have been sanctioned by the U.S. since 2015. The new sanctions target individuals involved in making financial transactions for the Houthis. See "Sanctions on Additional Houthi Financial Facilitators", U.S. Department of State, 18 July 2024.

¹¹⁸ "Biden revokes terrorist designation for Yemen's Houthis", Associated Press, 6 February 2021.

¹¹⁹ "Biden administration re-designates Houthis as Specially Designated Global Terrorists", CNN, 17 January 2024. "Yemen: Terrorism Designation, U.S. Policy, and Congress", U.S. Congressional Research Service, 27 January 2025.

¹²⁰ "Terrorist Designation of the Houthis", press release, U.S. State Department, 17 January 2024.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Omani expert close to the U.S.-Houthi talks, Muscat, April 2024.

¹²² "Iran and U.S. held secret talks on proxy attacks and ceasefire", *The New York Times*, 15 March 2024. Iran suspended the talks after Israel killed Hezbollah leaders and commanders in September 2024. "FM: Iran suspends indirect talks with US amid rising regional tension", *Middle East Monitor*, 15 October 2024.

U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Bangkok, he brought up the issue in the hope that Beijing would use its economic influence with Iran to this end. Yet Wang gave no indication that China would follow Washington's suggestion.¹²³

None of these diplomatic forays dented Houthi resolve, however, with the group explicitly and repeatedly linking de-escalation in the Red Sea to an end of the Gaza war. They even conditioned freeing the *Galaxy Leader*'s crew on Hamas's approval. In January 2024, when the governments of the sailors' countries of origin reached out to the Houthis via Oman to seek the crew members' release, the Houthis responded, "Go and negotiate with Hamas, not with us".¹²⁴

As tensions escalated rather than abated over the course of 2024, more countries dispatched warships to the Red Sea to protect their maritime interests in case of attack – and not just by the Houthis. Iran sent the *Alborz* destroyer into these waters in January, announcing that it would start escorting Iranian commercial vessels, ostensibly to protect them from U.S. attack.¹²⁵ The next month, China's navy began accompanying Chinese cargo ships.¹²⁶ In March, Russia also sent warships through the Bab al-Mandab amid fears that violence could worsen.¹²⁷

The EU and its member states increased their naval presence as well. In February 2024, the EU launched a "defensive maritime security operation" called Aspides in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to "restore and safeguard freedom of navigation".¹²⁸ As part of this operation, a German frigate foiled two Houthi drone attacks and an Italian destroyer intercepted several other drones.¹²⁹ Several European countries – Denmark, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands and Norway – were already participating in the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian. Establishing a distinct EU mission demonstrated the bloc's wish to distance itself from that operation's shift onto the offensive with the U.S.-UK airstrikes in Yemen. "Our purpose is not to conduct any kind of attack, but just to defend", said Josep Borrell, then the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy.¹³⁰

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, senior U.S. diplomat, Doha, December 2023. See also "US-China meetings fail to produce breakthrough on Red Sea shipping attacks", *Politico*, 27 January 2024.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, independent Yemeni mediator, January 2024. "Houthis confirm that any decision regarding the ship it has detained is exclusively in the hands of al-Qassam", *Arabi21.com*, 7 March 2024 [Arabic]. It was not until January 2025 that, thanks to an Omani mediation effort, the Houthis let the ship's crew go, saying they did so at Hamas's request. "Yemen's Houthi rebels release crew of commercial vessel seized in Red Sea in November 2023", *Associated Press*, 3 January 2025.

¹²⁵ "Iran deploys destroyer to Red Sea", *Tasnim Agency*, 1 January 2024.

¹²⁶ "After flak over lack of action, Chinese navy starts escorting cargo ships through Red Sea", *Times of India*, 3 February 2024.

¹²⁷ "Russian navy enters warship-crowded Red Sea amid Houthi attacks", *Bloomberg*, 28 March 2024.

¹²⁸ "Security and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea: Council launches EUNAVFOR ASPIDES", press release, Council of the European Union, 19 February 2024.

¹²⁹ "Italian navy shoots down 2 drones in Red Sea", *Anadolu Agency*, 12 March 2024.

¹³⁰ "Security and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea: Council launches EUNAVFOR ASPIDES", op. cit.

B. The Houthis and Their Adversaries Double Down

U.S. efforts did little to deter the Houthis from Gaza war-related military action. To the contrary, having turned to Red Sea attacks when most of their drones and missiles failed to reach Israeli territory or were knocked down, the Houthis extended their projectiles' range. By mid-2024, they were managing on occasion to evade interception and penetrate Israeli defences. They also steadily improved the accuracy of their attacks on shipping by using advanced weapons. They struck a ship in the Arabian Sea with a ballistic missile on 24 June; the *Tutor* with a sea drone on 12 June; and the Greek-flagged tanker *Sunion* in a drone and missile attack in August.

On 20 July 2024, the conflict entered a new phase when the Houthis sent an exploding drone to Tel Aviv that killed one person.¹³¹ Until then, Israel had refrained from responding to Houthi attacks, leaving it to the U.S. and allies to intercept Houthi missiles before they could reach Israel. But the direct hit that caused a fatality changed Israel's outlook. The next day, the Israeli air force carried out the first of several bombing raids on Houthi positions in Yemen.¹³² A second, targeting Houthi-controlled port facilities in Hodeida, followed in September, while a third in December struck several locations in both Sanaa and Hodeida.¹³³ In January 2025, Israel (alongside the U.S. and UK) conducted a fourth round of airstrikes, hitting Sanaa, Amran and Hodeida dozens of times in response to multiple Houthi missile and drone attacks on Israel toward the end of 2024.¹³⁴

The U.S. and UK also stepped up their strikes on Houthi military assets in northern Yemen in the closing months of 2024. The surge followed the Houthis' statement on 27 September that they had hit three U.S. destroyers in the Red Sea, a claim the U.S. did not confirm. On 4 October, the U.S. and UK bombed fifteen sites in Sanaa, Dhamar and al-Bayda containing what the U.S. said were Houthi weapons systems and other military equipment.¹³⁵ U.S. B-2 stealth bombers also struck Houthi underground bunkers in Sanaa and Saada on 16 October.¹³⁶ Further air raids followed. On 10 November, the U.S. blew up a vehicle carrying two Houthi leaders in Saoumaa district in al-Bayda.¹³⁷ On 17 December, the U.S. struck

¹³¹ "Speech of the Leader of the Revolution regarding the Israeli aggression on Yemen", Saba News Agency, 21 July 2024 [Arabic].

¹³² "Israel says it struck Yemen's Hodeida in response to Houthi attacks", Al Jazeera, 20 July 2024.

¹³³ "Israel strikes Houthi targets in Yemen after missile attack", BBC, 19 December 2024.

¹³⁴ "20 Israeli jets attack two ports and a power plant used by Houthis in Yemen", *Times of Israel*, 10 January 2025; and "How the Houthis Have Changed the Landscape of Regional War", Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 29 August 2024. The Houthis say they have started using hypersonic missiles, a claim the Israeli military disputes. "Israeli army says Houthi missile not 'hypersonic,' successfully intercepted but not destroyed", *Haaretz*, 15 September 2024. The Yemeni government alleges that Iran supplied these missiles to the Houthis through Hodeida, but the Houthis claim to have developed them themselves. "Houthis boast of advanced military capabilities", *Middle East Eye*, 21 September 2024.

¹³⁵ "U.S. warships and aircraft strike over a dozen Houthi targets in Yemen", CBC News, 4 October 2024. Another round of airstrikes on 13 October focused on al-Salif district in Hodeida. "Houthis report 2 more US-UK airstrikes on Yemen's Al-Hudaydah", Anadolu Agency, 14 October 2024.

¹³⁶ "US B-2 bombers strike Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen", CNN, 17 October 2024.

¹³⁷ "US aircraft targets a car in Saoumaa, al-Bayda", *Akhbar al-Yaman al-An*, 12 November 2024 [Arabic].

the Houthis' defence ministry, saying it housed the leaders responsible for the group's military operations.¹³⁸

C. A Short-lived Truce

As the Houthis had promised, the truce between Israel and Hamas announced on 16 January 2025 spurred a dramatic change in their military campaign. The Humanitarian Operations Coordination Centre informed companies that the group would end its attacks on ships in the Red Sea, "except for vessels wholly owned by Israeli individuals or entities and/or sailing under the Israeli flag". It added that it would stop firing on those ships, too, upon full completion of all three of the Gaza ceasefire agreement's phases (in practice, it suspended all attacks on ships until the truce broke down).¹³⁹ Abdul-Malik al-Houthi went on to say the group would not launch projectiles at Israel as long the Gaza truce lasted, unless Israel were to strike Yemen first.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the group showered praise upon itself for having contributed to achieving the ceasefire, saying it had received expressions of gratitude from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.¹⁴¹

Though the Gaza truce reduced tensions in the Red Sea, a return to conflict never looked far away. The Houthis seemed ready to recommence their attacks whenever they saw fit.¹⁴² In a 26 January speech, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi said his group was monitoring the ceasefire's progress alongside developments in the West Bank, reiterating the group's unwavering support for the Palestinian cause. He warned of renewed escalation if Israel were to violate the ceasefire or resume what he called "genocidal crimes".¹⁴³ (In February, U.S. officials say, the Houthis shot at a U.S. F-16 fighter jet and an MQ-9 Reaper drone – but missed.¹⁴⁴) On 11 March, after a week in which Israel blocked aid shipments into Gaza in contravention of

¹³⁸ Mohammed al-Basha, a Washington-based analyst of Yemeni affairs, has tracked the U.S. and UK airstrikes on X (@BashaReport).

¹³⁹ "Houthis announce partial stop to Red Sea attacks", *Lloyd's List*, 19 January 2025. Shipping firms may not be reassured that navigating the Bab al-Mandab is safe. The French company CMA CGM, for example, issued a statement following the Gaza truce agreement indicating that its vessels will continue to use alternative routes, such as around the Cape of Good Hope, for the time being. "Red Sea / Gulf of Aden Update", CMA CGM, 25 January 2025.

¹⁴⁰ "Text of the speech of the Leader of the Revolution on the anniversary of the martyr leader 1446 AH", Saba News Agency, 26 January 2025 [Arabic].

¹⁴¹ "Speech of Sayyed Abdul-Malik Badr al-Din al-Houthi on the announcement of the ceasefire agreement in Gaza", Ansar Allah, 16 January 2025 [Arabic]. Since the ceasefire announcement, the Houthis have refrained from attacks, apart from two projectiles fired at Israel before the agreement came into force on 19 January, which they claimed were launched in response to Israeli attacks. Tweet by Yahya Sarea, Houthi military spokesman, @army21ye, 1:00pm, 18 January 2025.

¹⁴² "Yemen's Houthis to target only Israel-linked vessels following Gaza deal", Reuters, 20 January 2025.

¹⁴³ He said, "We remain on high alert, ready to intervene immediately whenever the Israeli enemy resumes its escalation, genocidal crimes or the siege on Gaza, preventing food and medicine from reaching its people. We stand prepared to escalate again alongside our mujahid brothers in Palestine". "Text of the speech of the Leader of the Revolution on the anniversary of the martyr leader 1446 AH", op. cit.

¹⁴⁴ "Yemen's Houthis launched missile at U.S. fighter jet, missed", Reuters, 22 February 2025. The Houthis claim to have downed an M-69 Reaper drone flying in a "hostile action" over Hodeida on 4 March. "Downing of American aircraft in skies of Hodeida", 26 September, 4 March 2025 [Arabic].

the ceasefire terms, the Houthis said they would fire on “all Israeli ships” steaming through the waters of the Red Sea or Gulf of Aden.¹⁴⁵

In response, and perhaps also in retaliation for the fire upon U.S. aircraft, the Trump administration launched a fresh military operation against the group. On 15 March, the U.S. carried out more than 40 airstrikes on Houthi positions in Yemen’s northern governorates, including Sanaa, Saada, Hajjah and Amran, killing around 50 people and injuring more than a hundred.¹⁴⁶ The bombardment continued into 17 March, with U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth saying it would be “unrelenting” until the Houthis stood down from their maritime campaign.¹⁴⁷ Following the U.S. airstrikes, the Houthis warned they would broaden their targets in the Red Sea to include U.S. ships alongside Israeli ones. They subsequently fired missiles and drones at vessels of a U.S. aircraft carrier group in the Red Sea, but these were either shot down or failed to reach the targets.¹⁴⁸ In response, Trump said the U.S. would consider any attack or retaliation by the Houthis as directed by Tehran, warning that Iran in that event would suffer “dire consequences”.¹⁴⁹

The violence soon worsened. Israel’s decision to resume the war in Gaza on 18 March led the Houthis to fire missiles at Israel; these did not hit their targets, but further action against the Houthis from the U.S. and Israel now appears probable, while the possibility of a U.S.-Israeli war with Iran has increased. Having weakened Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran over the past six months, Israel may view the latest actions by the Houthis as an opportunity to destroy the group’s military capabilities once and for all, thinking it would have the new Trump administration’s blessing.¹⁵⁰

Prior to the mid-March strikes, the Trump administration had already assumed a hawkish stance toward the Houthis: on 22 January, it issued an executive order restoring the group’s designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (on top of the renewed Special Designated Global Terrorist listing it inherited from its predecessor).¹⁵¹ The designation took effect on 4 March. The following day, the U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions on top Houthi leaders, including the head

¹⁴⁵ “Yemen’s Houthi rebels say ‘any Israeli vessel’ in nearby Mideast waterways again a target”, Associated Press, 12 March 2025. The Houthis’ spokesperson said the group would “[resume] the ban on the passage of all Israeli ships in the designated operations zone in both the Red and Arabian Seas, as well as the Bab al-Mandab strait and the Gulf of Aden. This ban shall take effect from the time this statement is issued ... [and] continue until the crossings to the Gaza Strip are reopened and aid, food and medicine are allowed in”. Tweet by Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea, @army21ye, 9:50pm, 11 March 2025.

¹⁴⁶ “Trump orders strikes on Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and issues new warning”, Associated Press, 16 March 2025.

¹⁴⁷ “US says airstrikes against Houthis in Yemen will continue indefinitely”, *The Guardian*, 16 March 2025. Hegseth said: “This campaign is about freedom of navigation and restoring deterrence. The moment the Houthis say, ‘We’ll stop shooting at your ships, we’ll stop shooting at your drones’, it will stop”. Hegseth pledges ‘unrelenting’ strikes on Houthis in Yemen: What to know”, *The Hill*, 17 March 2025.

¹⁴⁸ “Trump says Iran will suffer ‘dire’ consequences for any more Houthi attacks”, ABC News, 18 March 2025; and “Houthi military spokesman statement”, cited in a tweet by Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea, @army21ye, 16 March 2025.

¹⁴⁹ “Trump says Iran will suffer ‘dire’ consequences for any more Houthi attacks”, op. cit.

¹⁵⁰ “Israel shifts focus to Houthis, but it needs partners to defeat distant foe”, *Times of Israel*, 25 December 2024.

¹⁵¹ “Designation of Ansar Allah as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation”, White House, 22 January 2025.

of the negotiating team, Mohammed Abdelsalam, and the head of the Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat.¹⁵² These steps are likely to exacerbate tensions between the group and the Yemeni government, which may decide to enforce the FTO and other financial sanctions.¹⁵³ The Houthis might then take retaliatory action.¹⁵⁴

The Houthis are already on their guard at home, anticipating that Yemeni forces aligned with the Saudi-backed government might go on the offensive.¹⁵⁵ To launch such a venture, these forces would need military support from the U.S. and other Western nations. In the meantime, the Houthis are deploying thousands of fighters in coastal areas of the Hodeida, Lahj and Taiz governorates.

¹⁵² “Designation of Ansarallah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization”, U.S. Department of State, 4 March 2025; and “Treasury Targets Houthi Leaders Involved in Smuggling and Procuring Weapons”, U.S. Department of the Treasury, 5 March 2025.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Yemeni official in the PLC office, January 2025.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Yemen Central Bank, Amman, February 2025.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Ali al-Emad, senior member of the Houthis’ political bureau, on Al-Mayadeen TV, as posted on his X feed, @ali_ali_alimad, 7:53am, January 2025 [Arabic].

V. The Ripple Effects of Red Sea Violence

Military escalation in the Red Sea has damaged maritime trade and the global economy. Houthi attacks have driven up insurance payments for shipping companies and forced them to put more security personnel on board their vessels. Several firms have rerouted their ships around Africa's Cape of Good Hope, increasing costs even further.¹⁵⁶ The once-busy Suez Canal has seen traffic fall by 50 per cent, cutting deeply into Egypt's crucial transit fee revenue, while Israel's Eilat port has halted 85 per cent of its commercial activity.¹⁵⁷ Lengthened shipping times – with the journey between Asia and Europe extended by ten to fourteen days – have disrupted global supply chains.¹⁵⁸

The Houthi attacks have also delayed, if not yet terminated, efforts to end the war inside Yemen. Before 7 October 2023, Saudi Arabia and the Houthis had been making progress in their negotiations aimed at ending the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen and starting an intra-Yemeni political process, with a deal reportedly imminent.¹⁵⁹ But that November the two sides suspended announcement of the agreement indefinitely when the U.S., and then Saudi Arabia, insisted that Houthi de-escalation in the Red Sea be part of the final terms.¹⁶⁰ The Houthis rejected this demand, saying their Red Sea operations have no connection to their conflict with the Saudi-led coalition.¹⁶¹ The talks may fizzle out altogether, particularly if the Houthis resume their attacks on Israel and on cargo vessels.

The future course of negotiations remains uncertain. But if the parties can finally come to an agreement – an outcome that may well depend on Saudi Arabia, which is keen to pull its military out of Yemen – the Houthis' greater strength in relation to other armed groups in the country would still jeopardise chances for a genuine intra-Yemeni peace process. The Houthis tend to view other Yemeni armed groups, including those linked to the internationally recognised PLC government, as little more than appendages of the Saudi-led coalition, and they are unlikely to negotiate a political settlement with these factions unless faced with major military or economic pressure.¹⁶² The risk remains of a return to fighting between the Houthis and their Yemeni adversaries, whom they accuse of being U.S. stooges who want to control all of Yemen.

¹⁵⁶ "What do Red Sea assaults mean for global trade?", BBC, 12 January 2024.

¹⁵⁷ "Red Sea attacks decrease Suez Canal's revenues by 50%", Egypt Today, 25 March 2024.

¹⁵⁸ "Sailing through the Storms: The Fallout of Red Sea Disruptions on Global Trade and Inflation", Center for Economic and Policy Research, 26 April 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°89, *How Houthi-Saudi Negotiations Will Make or Break Yemen*, 29 December 2022. Riyadh had been aiming to announce an agreement with the Houthis in late 2023. Crisis Group interview, senior UN official, Tunis, September 2024.

¹⁶⁰ "Red Sea Attacks Provoke International Response", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 27 December 2023.

¹⁶¹ Tweet by Mohammed Abdelsalam, Houthi spokesman, @abdusalamsalah, 12:14pm, 16 December 2023.

¹⁶² Crisis Group telephone interviews, Sanaa-based senior Houthi officials, December 2023. The Houthis see themselves as Yemen's most powerful group. In the negotiations with the Saudis, they have focused on revenue rather than power sharing, in accordance with their economic priorities. They want intra-Yemeni talks to involve only political groups that participated alongside them in the 2013-2014 National Dialogue Conference (though they boycotted its final session and rejected its proposals), and they refuse to engage with any group formed after the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in 2015.

Both Yemeni sides now seem to be preparing for renewed war. Emboldened by their military successes at sea, the Houthis have deployed more fighters and weapons to several internal fronts that have largely been quiet since the Red Sea hostilities began.¹⁶³ So, too, have their enemies – the groups aligned with the PLC, which watched the Houthis' adventurism in the Red Sea with growing concern.¹⁶⁴ These pro-government forces are seeking military assistance from the U.S. and other nations harmed by Houthi attacks on shipping. To date, clashes between the two sides within Yemen have remained limited, but hostilities could intensify, especially in Marib, Shabwa, Lahj and Taiz – traditionally the war's most active fronts – as time passes.¹⁶⁵

Even if a fresh round of fighting does not break out inside Yemen, the country's humanitarian crisis will almost certainly worsen. By the end of December 2024, the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan, which had sought \$4.34 billion to assist 17.3 million people in Yemen, was only 38.3 per cent funded, forcing aid organisations to reduce or close critical assistance programs.¹⁶⁶ The World Food Programme (WFP) had to reduce the number of people served in Houthi-controlled northern Yemen from 9.5 million to 6.5 million. In December 2023, the WFP suspended aid in these areas due to funding shortages and disagreements with the Houthis over how to help the most needy with the depleted resources available.¹⁶⁷ In June 2024, meanwhile, the Houthis launched a crackdown on local and international organisations, including UN agencies, arresting over 100 aid workers and accusing them of spying for Western nations the group opposes.¹⁶⁸ Despite UN efforts to secure these staff members' release, the Houthis arrested more of their colleagues in January 2025, forcing UN agencies to suspend movement in

¹⁶³ Crisis Group telephone interview, Sanaa-based senior Houthi official, May 2024; and Crisis Group interview, Yemeni government military officer, Istanbul, July 2024.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. In April 2024, for example, southern separatist fighters handed over positions to the pro-government Nation Shield Forces in Lahj, given the latter's proven success fighting on that front. Crisis Group interviews, government, STC and Islah party officials, Aden and Riyadh, January 2024.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Houthi journalists and Yemeni government official, July 2024.

¹⁶⁶ "Yemen Humanitarian Response Snapshot (October 2023)", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 31 December 2023.

¹⁶⁷ Aid workers say many donors have been increasing funding for Ukraine and reducing it for Yemen, on the grounds that conditions in Yemen have improved following the truce. Additionally, some donors are unhappy with the WFP's work in Houthi-controlled areas, where the majority of the Yemeni population lives, viewing it as benefiting the rebel group. Crisis Group telephone interviews, international humanitarian agency staff, January 2024. The WFP said it paused aid in northern areas for two reasons: limited funding and "the absence of an agreement with the authorities on a smaller program that matches available resources to the neediest families". Its operations in Houthi-controlled areas have long been marred by Houthi attempts to influence who gets food aid. The WFP has been adamant that it be afforded full independence in selecting the neediest for assistance, in line with humanitarian principles and best practices. "WFP pauses food distributions in northern areas of Yemen", WFP, 5 December 2023.

¹⁶⁸ "Houthis detain Yemeni staff for UN, US organisations", Reuters, 7 June 2024. One of the arrested staff members, who worked for WFP, died in custody in February. "WFP worker died in detention in Houthi-controlled Yemen", BBC, 11 February 2025.

Houthi-controlled areas.¹⁶⁹ As a result, millions of people in northern Yemen stopped receiving the aid packages they had been getting for years.¹⁷⁰

Rising shipping and insurance costs have also made goods imported through Hodeida more expensive, making it harder for Yemenis to buy food and other basic commodities.¹⁷¹ Economic conditions could deteriorate further in the coming months as a result of the latest exchange of fire and the Trump administration's redesignation of the Houthis as an FTO along with other U.S. sanctions, triggering a contraction of trade and financial flows to Yemen, a depreciation of the Yemeni currency and a rise in the price of food and other basic goods.¹⁷²

Lastly, the violence has raised concerns about the environmental and economic impact of strikes on vessels carrying toxic substances such as oil or chemicals. The March 2023 sinking of the *Rubymar*, a British vessel carrying 21,000 tonnes of ammonium phosphate sulphate fertiliser, is one alarming case.¹⁷³ Oil or chemical spills could cause huge damage to the maritime ecosystems along the Yemeni coast, threatening the livelihoods of thousands of fisherfolk, a concern that preoccupied the Security Council for years while the *FSO Safer* floating oil storage vessel was decaying in waters off Hodeida.¹⁷⁴ The International Maritime Organization has started working with the Yemeni government to address the impact of the *Rubymar*'s sinking, but it has yet to take any meaningful steps, as before the Gaza ceasefire it could not easily operate at sea while the Houthis were firing drones and missiles.¹⁷⁵ In addition, the Houthis' use of mines to attack ships continues to pose a grave threat to the Red Sea's unique underwater fish farms off the Yemeni coast.¹⁷⁶

VI. Conclusion

Even prior to the latest exchange of fire, Houthi attacks and U.S.-led airstrikes had upset freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, raised the cost of shipping and

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, Amman, December 2024. See also "UN suspends movement in Houthi-held areas after staff detained", BBC, 24 January 2025.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, international humanitarian agency staff, January 2024.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Chinese and Yemeni shipping company representatives, Istanbul, April 2024.

¹⁷² Crisis Group telephone interview, senior aid worker based in Aden, January 2025. See also "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Re-designates the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization", White House, 22 January 2025.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Chinese shipping company representative, Istanbul, April 2024; Yemeni shipping company representatives, Istanbul, April 2024.

¹⁷⁴ In July 2023, the UN helped prevent an environmental catastrophe threatened by the *Safer*, which contained over one million barrels of oil that could have spilled into the Red Sea. "United Nations completes removal of oil from decaying tanker in Red Sea", UN Development Programme, 11 August 2023. By transferring the oil and replacing the vessel, the UN demonstrated the effectiveness of coordinated international action in difficult political circumstances. It could play a similar role with the *Rubymar* – another disaster waiting to happen.

¹⁷⁵ "UN launches campaign to collect funds, clean up pollution caused by sinking ship in Red Sea", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 8 July 2024; and "Exclusive: UN special envoy to *al-Hadath*: Houthi Red Sea attacks complicate Yemen mediation", Al Arabiya, 5 March 2024.

¹⁷⁶ Michael Horton, "Attacks on Red Sea shipping pay dividends for Yemen's Houthis", Responsible Statecraft, 26 December 2023.

disrupted worldwide supply chains. Inside Yemen, events in the Red Sea have derailed what were poised to be the first steps toward resolution of the country's own conflict, while causing serious concerns about environmental damage stemming from the ships that have sunk. Although the Houthis initially suspended strikes on ships they deem not linked to Israel following the Gaza truce, the group's leaders remained adamant that they would not halt their campaign for good until Israel ends its war in Gaza and lifts its siege of the strip. Now that the ceasefire has collapsed, renewed salvos between the U.S. and the Houthis, as well as the Houthis and Israel, amid rising tensions between Western states and Iran, and the potential for a fresh upsurge in fighting in Yemen have cast a darkening pall over the region.

The crisis in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden underscores the dangerous interplay of regional rivalries, global maritime security and the evolving tactics of non-state actors like the Houthis. While international powers have sought to establish deterrence through military action, their operations have so far failed to stop the Houthi attacks, instead bolstering the group's resolve. Thus, the threat to global trade and regional stability persists.

March 2025
