

The Militia that Became a Power Player: The Houthis' Shocking Rise

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Key Points

- The Houthis have evolved from a local militia to a regional power player through their three-circle strategy of maritime disruption, military projection, and regional influence.
- Maritime operations with over 100 vessel attacks have effectively disrupted global trade, reducing Suez Canal traffic by 60%.
- With 220+ attacks against Israel, including successful strikes on Tel Aviv, the Houthis have demonstrated significant power projection capabilities beyond Yemen.
- Strategic alliances with regional actors have expanded the Houthis' influence across the Middle East.
- International military countermeasures have proven challenging due to the asymmetric nature of the conflict and the Houthis' ability to sustain operations.
- Addressing this strategic surprise moment before it metastasizes and further impacts regional stability and security with global impacts requires a comprehensive response that transcends military solutions.

Introduction

Despite nearly a decade of war in Yemen, the world has largely ignored the Houthis, with the conflict often labeled as "the forgotten war." However, following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, the Houthis have propelled themselves onto the global stage. Seizing the opportunity presented by the ensuing Gaza conflict, the Iran-backed militia has transformed from a local insurgency to a significant regional power player, forcing the international community to take notice. This dramatic and unexpected rise of the Houthis represents a *game changer* event in Middle East geopolitics.¹

By launching a substantial number of missiles and drones at maritime targets and Israeli territory within the first year of their multiphase campaign, the Houthis have not only demonstrated their military capabilities but also positioned themselves as champions of the Palestinian cause aiming to be "*first in, last out.*"² This paper examines how the Houthis' actions have elevated their status within the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance," rattled global markets, and compelled the world to confront a conflict that can no longer be dismissed as a distant Middle Eastern problem.

This analysis integrates research and cross-references multiple open sources, including official government statements, verified incident reports, and newspaper articles. The period under review spans from October 2023 to

the beginning of January 2025, concentrating on events linked to the Houthis' operational behaviors and their evolving alliances.

Strategic Significance

The Houthis' actions in the Red Sea and beyond represent a major change in the balance of power in the Middle East. Using unconventional methods, they challenge traditional governments and established security frameworks. Targeting weak points in maritime and aerial defenses has caused concerns for regional countries and global powers relying on Middle Eastern stability and safe shipping routes.³

The Houthis' strategy, allegedly initiated in response to Israel's actions in Gaza, can be conceptualized as three concurrent and interconnected phases, structured like concentric circles.

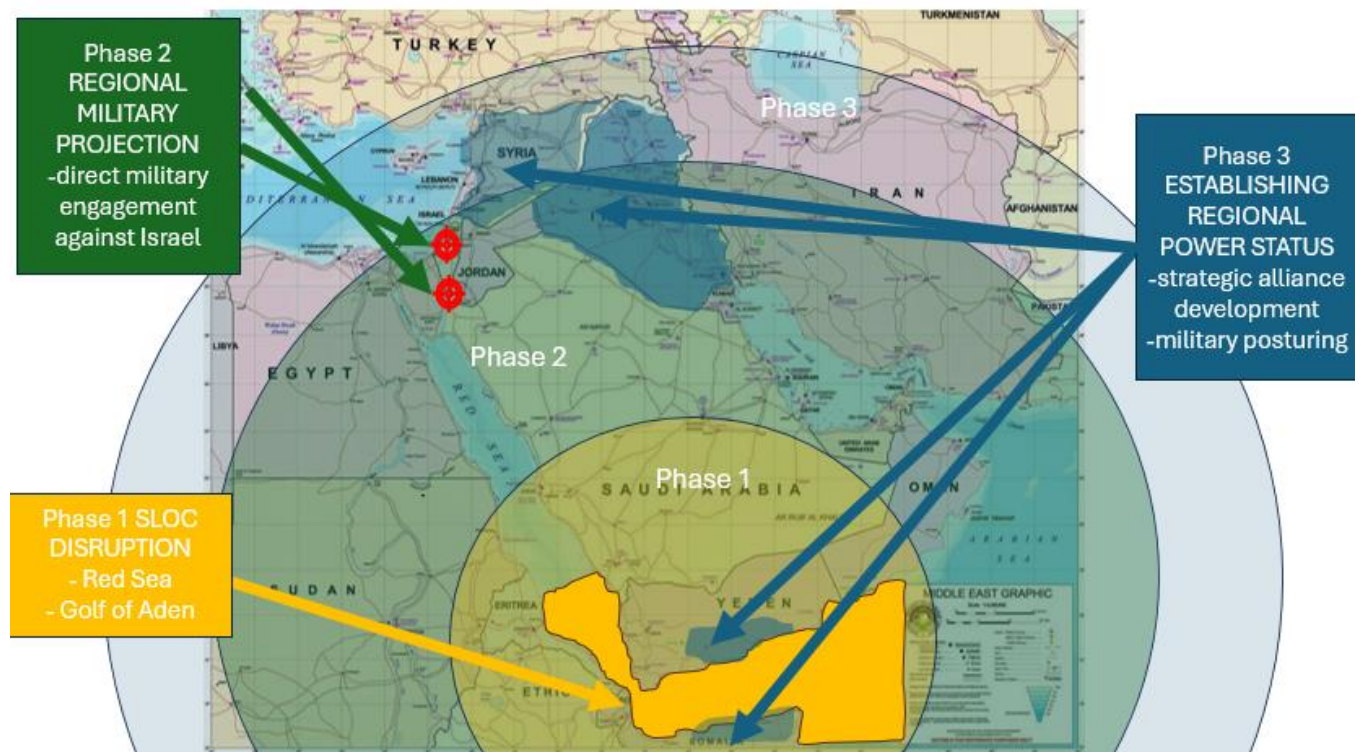


Figure 1, Houthis' Strategy

Source: <https://www.mapsland.com/maps/asia/iraq/large-detailed-middle-east-graphic-map-with-all-air-force-bases-2003.jpg>

Modified by the Author, Houthi strategy phases are depicted for illustrative purposes.

The innermost circle focuses on disrupting vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) within their near territory, specifically targeting key shipping lanes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. This disruption has forced many commercial vessels to reroute, confirming the Houthis' capability to influence critical maritime routes.

The second phase extends their efforts to a broader regional military projection: from local insurgency to regional threat through direct military engagements targeting Israel, showcasing their military capabilities, and forcing adversaries to divert resources for defense.

The outermost circle encompasses their ambition to establish regional power status, enhancing their legitimacy and influence across the Middle East. By framing their Red Sea attacks as acts of solidarity with Gaza, they execute a psychological operation designed to shape perceptions and behaviors across multiple audiences. This strategy leverages narrative framing to position them as defenders of the Muslim nation, identity manipulation to transform their image from a local insurgency to a regional force, and emotional resonance to generate sympathy and support.

By executing these phases simultaneously, the Houthis create a synergistic effect where each phase reinforces the others. This synchronized approach aligns their military actions with diplomatic and informational efforts, to solidify their position as a key regional actor.

The Houthis' evolving capabilities, particularly in drone warfare and anti-ship missiles, present a persistent threat to regional infrastructure and international naval operations. Their advancements in military technology complicate efforts to maintain maritime security and pose challenges to traditional deterrence strategies.⁴

In summary, the Houthis' strategy signifies a profound change in the Middle Eastern power equilibrium, necessitating a reevaluation of security protocols among both regional players and global powers.

Phase 1 SLOC Disruption: Establishing Maritime Control

The Houthis' campaign in the Red Sea represents a fundamental shift in their operational approach, directly impacting global commerce by targeting one of the world's most critical maritime routes. Their actions have transformed a vital waterway that previously facilitated \$1 trillion in annual cargo movement into a high-risk zone for international shipping, demonstrating their ability to project power beyond Yemen's territorial waters.⁵

The scale and intensity of their maritime operations are evident in the execution of over 100 vessel attacks using a combination of missiles and drones. This sustained campaign highlights their operational capabilities, resilience, and calculated approach, systematically targeting vessels to create an environment of uncertainty and risk in international shipping lanes.⁶

The impacts of their campaign are severe, with two vessels sunk, one seized, and the tragic loss of four sailors.⁷ These incidents underscore the lethal nature of their operations and their willingness to escalate beyond mere harassment to direct military action against civilian maritime targets.

The effectiveness of their strategy is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the 60% reduction in Suez Canal traffic which has led to a significant loss in revenue for Egypt surpassing \$6 billion, as shipping companies opt for longer routes around Africa. This dramatic decrease in maritime traffic through one of the world's most crucial waterways represents a significant victory for the Houthis' strategic campaign, effectively demonstrating their ability to influence global maritime commerce.⁸

The economic effects of the Houthis' campaign go beyond immediate disruptions, leading to higher insurance premiums and increased freight costs. These financial consequences ripple through global supply chains, impacting markets and economies far beyond the conflict zone. The Houthis have effectively weaponized maritime trade, creating economic pressure points that draw international attention and response.

The Houthis, leveraging maritime terrorism and control of strategic chokepoints like the Red Sea and Bab El-Mandeb, have shifted from a local insurgency to an international actor through their ability to achieve partial sea denial, compelling global naval powers to address their threat to international trade routes.

This asymmetric approach for maritime disruption serves as the foundation of their broader strategy, demonstrating their capabilities while supporting their larger regional ambitions. The success of these operations has not only elevated their status but also provided leverage in broader regional dynamics, supporting their expansion into wider spheres of influence.

Phase 2 Regional Military Projection: From Local Insurgency to Regional Threat

The Houthis' execution of more than 220 attacks against Israel since October 2023 marks a significant expansion of their operational reach beyond their traditional sphere of influence. This sustained campaign marks their evolution from a localized insurgent force to a regional military actor capable of projecting power across significant distances. The frequency and persistence of these attacks, despite limited success rates, showcase their commitment to maintaining pressure on Israeli defenses and establishing themselves as a credible military threat.⁹

The July 19, 2024 strike on Tel Aviv with an improved Iranian-made Samad-3 UAV represents a pivotal moment in their campaign, resulting in one fatality and ten injuries.¹⁰ This successful penetration of Israeli air defenses not only demonstrated their growing technological capabilities but also marked a psychological victory, proving their ability to strike at the heart of Israel's most populous city. This attack served as a powerful statement of their expanding operational reach and growing sophistication in long-range strike operations.

Despite continued missile and UAV assaults, most were intercepted, and the impact on Israel limited. However, the Houthi missile strike on central Israel on September 15, 2024, marked a new phase in the escalation of the conflict, demonstrating the expanding range and capabilities of their missile technology. While there were no casualties, the incident highlighted the growing threat to Israeli territory and the potential for increased tensions in the region.¹¹

Subsequently, in December 2024, the Houthis launched over ten attacks against Israel, with three missiles successfully penetrating Israeli defenses. Notable incidents included a drone strike on a Yavneh residential building, a missile damaging the Ramat Efal Elementary School in Ramat Gan, and a missile hitting a Tel Aviv playground, injuring over 16 people.¹²

The enhancement of their military capabilities has been achieved through a comprehensive development program, primarily facilitated through training under Iranian and Hezbollah guidance.¹³ This cooperation has provided the Houthis with access to advanced tactical knowledge and operational expertise, particularly in the domains of UAV and missile operations. The transfer of technical knowledge and operational experience has significantly improved their ability to conduct complex, long-range strike missions.

The development of tunnel-based tactics represents an important adaptation of their military tactics, drawing from the experiences of other regional resistance movements.¹⁴ This evolution in their approach demonstrates their ability to learn from and integrate successful strategies employed by allied groups, potentially preparing for more direct confrontations in the future.

Their integration with Iran-aligned militias has created a network of cooperative military relationships, enabling them to overcome geographical limitations and extend their operational reach. This network facilitates joint

planning, shared intelligence, and coordinated attacks, multiplying their effectiveness beyond what their individual capabilities would allow.

However, their regional military projection remains constrained by significant geographical limitations and current operational capabilities. The physical distance to Israel, coupled with the presence of U.S.-allied nations like Saudi Arabia and Jordan along potential strike corridors, presents substantial challenges to their operations. These constraints have forced them to rely heavily on long-range missile and UAV strikes rather than more conventional military operations.

The focus on demonstrating long-range strike capabilities aligns with their broader strategic objectives, allowing them to project power while maintaining operational security within their core territory. This approach enables them to achieve strategic effects while minimizing risk to their forces, establishing themselves as a significant regional military actor despite their limitations.

Through this second circle of their strategy, the Houthis have effectively transformed themselves from a local militia into a regional military force capable of influencing events far beyond Yemen's borders. While their actual military successes against Israel have been limited, the psychological impact of their sustained campaign and occasional successful strikes has achieved their objective of establishing themselves as a credible military threat in the broader Middle Eastern theater.

Phase 3 Establishing Regional Power Status

The Houthis have significantly expanded their regional influence and operational capabilities through a series of alliances, diplomatic maneuvers, and military posturing, establishing themselves as a regional power. This expansion represents their "outer circle" of influence, extending well beyond Yemen's borders.

Alliance Development

The Houthis have forged a network of partnerships that amplify their regional impact. Their coordination with Iran-backed Iraqi militia groups has been particularly notable, with the two forces conducting coordinated operations against targets in Israel and maritime assets in the Red Sea. Between June and July 2024, they claimed responsibility for 12 joint attacks, utilizing both UAVs and cruise missiles, primarily targeting Haifa and other strategic locations.¹⁵

An emerging and surprising alliance with al-Shabaab in Somalia has further extended the Houthis' reach. U.S. defense officials report that the Houthis, with Iranian support, have sent engineers to assist al-Shabaab in developing advanced missiles, drones, and explosives. This collaboration aims to enhance al-Shabaab's capabilities and expand the Houthis' threat projection beyond the Red Sea.¹⁶

Reports of Houthi presence in Syria, alongside Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah forces, suggest a broader regional strategy. Unverified accounts indicate that Houthi commanders have met with Iranian and Hezbollah officials at a military base near the Iraqi border, with approximately 50 Houthi fighters reportedly deployed to southern Syria.¹⁷

In addition to these alliances, the Houthis' have developed an unexpected partnership with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Despite their ideological differences, the two groups have agreed to cease internal conflicts and coordinate attacks against their common adversaries, including the UN-recognized Republic of Yemen Government

and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC). The Houthis have provided AQAP with armed drones, thermal rockets, and reconnaissance equipment, while also releasing key AQAP figures from jail. This cooperation allows both groups to consolidate control over additional territory in Yemen, with the Houthis expanding their influence and AQAP securing a safe haven in southern Yemen.¹⁸

Diplomatic Maneuvers

The Houthis have skillfully navigated international diplomacy to bolster their position. China and Russia's abstention from UNSC Resolution 2722, which condemned Houthi attacks, demonstrates the group's growing diplomatic influence. In return for assurances of safe passage for Chinese and Russian vessels, these powers may offer political backing in international forums.¹⁹

The development of sophisticated smuggling networks, often involving Chinese companies, has been crucial to the Houthis' military capabilities. The U.S. Treasury Department has sanctioned several Chinese firms for supplying dual-use technologies essential to the Houthis' weapons programs. These networks utilize complex transshipment techniques, passing through multiple countries before reaching Yemen.²⁰

Military Posturing

The Houthis have directly challenged U.S. naval presence in the region, demonstrating their growing military capabilities. Throughout 2024, they intensified attacks on U.S. naval assets following the launch of Operations Prosperity Guardian and Poseidon Archer. The USS Dwight D. Eisenhower became a frequent target, with the Houthis claiming multiple missile attacks against the carrier.²¹

On September 27, 2024, the Houthis launched a significant assault involving multiple cruise missiles and UAVs targeting U.S. Navy ships in the Red Sea. While U.S. forces successfully intercepted these threats, the attack showcased the Houthis' ability to coordinate sophisticated multi-platform operations.²²

In December 2024, Houthi forces escalated attacks against U.S. naval assets in the Red Sea, the most significant attack involving cruise missiles and UAVs against the USS Harry S. Truman with CENTCOM successfully intercepting the multiple threats.²³

The Houthis' expansion of their "outer circle" of influence through strategic alliances, diplomatic maneuvering, and military posturing has transformed them from a localized insurgent force into a significant regional actor. Their ability to project power across the Middle East and East Africa, challenge major naval powers, and secure international diplomatic support marks a new phase in their evolution as a regional military and political force. This development has profound implications for regional stability and international maritime security, particularly in the critical Red Sea and Gulf of Aden shipping lanes.²⁴

International Response and Countermeasures

The international community's response to the Houthi aggression has been multifaceted, combining extensive military operations, diplomatic efforts, and economic sanctions. However, these measures have faced significant challenges in effectively deterring Houthi attacks.

U.S. and allied military operations have been at the forefront of the response. Operation Prosperity Guardian, launched by the U.S. in December 2023, stands as a pivotal multinational effort to address Houthi attacks on

commercial ships and other targets in the Red Sea region. This task force, comprising more than 20 countries, aims to protect freedom of navigation and deter Houthi's aggression.²⁵

In parallel, the European Union has established Operation ASPIDES, another maritime security mission focused on safeguarding commercial vessels in the Red Sea.²⁶

In addition to Operation Prosperity Guardian, the U.S. and the United Kingdom, with support from several other nations, launched Operation Poseidon Archer on January 12, 2024. This operation involved a series of cruise missile and airstrikes against Houthi targets in Yemen.

The intensity and frequency of these strikes have escalated over time. On October 17, 2024, the U.S. employed B-2 Spirit stealth bombers for the first time against Houthi targets. These advanced aircraft, capable of carrying up to 20 tons of munitions each, struck underground weapons storage facilities, missile storage facilities, and air defense systems. The use of B-2 bombers, worth approximately \$1 billion each, signaled a significant escalation in the U.S. response and demonstrated its commitment to degrading Houthi capabilities.²⁷

On November 9 and 10, 2024, the U.S. carried out consecutive nights of strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen. These strikes targeted numerous weapons storage facilities across at least three Houthi-controlled areas, focusing on advanced conventional weapons used to target military and civilian vessels.²⁸

In late December 2024, the U.S. intensified its military actions against Houthi targets in Yemen. The most significant operation occurred on December 30-31, when the U.S. conducted multiple precision strikes across Yemen, targeting command facilities, weapon production sites, and coastal radar installations.²⁹

In parallel to these international efforts, Israel has conducted its own operations in response to Houthi attacks. On July 20, 2024, Israel launched a series of airstrikes targeting Houthi military installations in Yemen. The Israeli strikes focused on the western port city of Hodeidah, a key Houthi stronghold, hitting several military targets including weapon storage facilities, a power-generating station, an oil refinery, and fuel depots.³⁰

On December 19, Israeli forces targeted Houthi-controlled ports, oil facilities, and power stations. A larger operation followed on December 26, striking Sanaa International Airport and other key locations, resulting in at least six fatalities and over 30 wounded.³¹

Despite these intensive military efforts, the Houthis have continued their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The persistence of these attacks has raised concerns about the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of the current countermeasures. The U.S. Navy has requested hundreds of millions of dollars in additional funding to restock its missile inventory, highlighting the stark disparity between the cost of advanced air defense systems and the relatively inexpensive weapons employed by the Houthis.³² This asymmetric conflict is further complicated by the Houthis' ability to rapidly replenish their stockpiles, likely with Iranian support, undermining efforts to degrade their capabilities through strikes alone.³³

Diplomatic efforts and sanctions have complemented military operations. The United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2739 on June 27, 2024, demanding that the Houthis immediately cease all attacks against merchant and commercial vessels.³⁴ Additionally, more than 40 countries have joined in condemning Houthi threats, demonstrating a united diplomatic front.³⁵

Given this complex situation, it's likely that many regional partners prefer to support the coalition's activities quietly, without direct attribution. This approach allows them to maintain a balance between supporting international efforts to ensure maritime security and avoiding potential political backlash or Houthi retribution.

The international community faces a complex task in balancing military action, diplomatic pressure, and economic measures to effectively counter Houthi aggression. As the situation continues to evolve, the efficacy of these responses and the potential need for new strategies remain subjects of ongoing debate and assessment.

Conclusion

The Houthis' rise as a regional power player highlights their ability to exploit instability and adapt to shifting geopolitics. Their ideological drive—rejecting UN resolutions and Israel's statehood, as emphasized in their slogans—reflects a commitment to a cause that transcends local or regional interests, marking them as a pivotal and disruptive actor.

With a strategy like an octopus extending its tentacles, they integrated their activities with Iran-aligned militias and forged new alliances with groups like al-Shabaab and AQAP which will broaden their influence across the Indian Ocean and threaten key maritime routes. These partnerships carry the potential to destabilize the region further, extending Houthi control and reshaping the geopolitical dynamics of both the Middle East and the Indian Ocean.

Addressing this strategic surprise moment before it metastasizes and further impacts regional stability and security with global impacts requires a comprehensive response that transcends military solutions. Diplomatic, Informational, and Economic instruments must be employed together with strategic military measures to counter their expansion effectively. A "whole of government" approach from the U.S. is essential, ensuring alignment among U.S. domestic agencies and international partners to develop a cohesive and effective strategy. Even more, the internationally recognized government of Yemen must be actively involved in this process, as its inclusion is crucial for any sustainable resolution, even though the Houthis control the most densely populated areas of the country. Failure to act decisively risks allowing the Houthis to solidify their role as a disruptive force, extending their octopus-like influence across the Indian Ocean and into the heart of global trade and security dynamics, and more than that, it could risk normalizing chokepoint disruption as a strategic weapon. Their success highlights how asymmetric tactics can challenge global powers, a lesson that could be applied beyond the Middle East—particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where securing maritime access is critical.

Given the Houthis' evolving threat and their growing capacity to disrupt regional stability and global trade, a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach is essential to counter their influence and prevent further escalation.

Diplomatic

A robust diplomatic strategy is crucial to counter the Houthis' growing international relevance. This entails forming a coalition of affected nations, including the EU, Asian countries, and Gulf states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, to pool resources and coordinate responses. Diplomacy should also prioritize engaging Iran to pressure it into halting its support for the Houthis. Given the evolving situation in the region, such as the diminished operational capacity of Hamas and Hezbollah, and the recent fall of the Assad regime in Syria, Iran might redirect its resources and focus towards bolstering the Houthis. This could position the Houthis as Tehran's primary tool for regional influence and disruption. At the same time, it is essential to keep the internationally recognized government of Yemen actively involved in discussions throughout the process, as they are the legitimate entity that must fill the void left by the Houthis' collapse, ensuring stability and governance in the region.

Informational

An effective informational strategy is essential to weaken the Houthis' regional power projection and legitimacy. This can be achieved through strategic communications that counter Houthi propaganda and highlight the humanitarian and economic consequences of their actions on civilians and global trade. Strengthening regional media campaigns to undermine their legitimacy and emphasize the benefits of regional cooperation is vital. Cyber operations to disrupt Houthi communication and propaganda networks are also critical and countering the Houthis' information campaigns is imperative to expose the true impact of their activities.

Military

A unified and robust military response is necessary to neutralize the Houthis' maritime disruption and power projection. Establishing a centralized command structure to integrate operations such as Operation Prosperity Guardian, EUNAVFOR Aspides, and Poseidon Archer is key. Enhanced maritime interdiction in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean is critical for intercepting weapons shipments and disrupting smuggling routes. Continuing targeted strikes on Houthi infrastructure is crucial, and extending these operations to include Houthi leadership, and high-value personnel, while minimizing collateral damage, should be prioritized. This approach will help degrade their operational capabilities, maintain international support, and further destabilize their command structure.

Economic

Economic measures are pivotal to undermining the Houthis' capabilities and reducing their local support base. Stricter enforcement of sanctions on Houthi revenue streams, such as smuggling networks and illicit trade, is essential. Recent sanctions by the UK and U.S., alongside the UN Security Council's reaffirmation of the arms embargo, mark significant progress. Providing financial assistance to regional partners to enhance land and maritime border controls can further strengthen security and disrupt smuggling operations. Encouraging Gulf states and international stakeholders to invest in infrastructure and economic stability in the Houthi-affected areas will help improve local conditions and erode support for the group.

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