

GAZA 2023 - CONFLICTS

The Houthis in Yemen Gain the World's Attention

Friday 19 January 2024, by [LACKNER Helen](#) (Date first published: 10 January 2024).

By bombing Yemen and risking an extension of the conflict, the United States and its allies claim that they want to stop the attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea by the Houthis. The Houthis, who set themselves up as the sole defenders of the Palestinian cause, have solid assets at home and in the region.

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*Sanaa, 13 October 2023. Solidarity march with Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip
Mohammed Huwais/AFP*

The past few months have brought [the Houthi movement](#) to the front pages of the European media - something that nine years of regionalised civil war in Yemen had failed to achieve. So it took acts of support for the Palestinians in the Red Sea for its very existence to become a global issue.

Since 2015, Ansar Allah (the movement's official name) has controlled Sana'a as well as most of the Red Sea coast, and rules two thirds of the population with an iron fist. Its program aims to ensure the domination of the Sada (descendants of the Prophet, also known as Ashraf or Hashemites) domestically, and emphasises hostility to the United States and Israel in foreign policy. The war in Gaza gave him renewed popularity at home and abroad, at a time when most Yemenis aspired to peace.

The issue of Palestine is alive in Yemen: alongside millions elsewhere, Yemenis are appalled by the awful massacres taking place in Gaza. For once, when the Houthis call for mass demonstrations, Yemeni crowds respond with genuine commitment. Regardless of the unpopularity of Ansar Allah rule, most Yemenis probably supported its leader, Abdul Malik al Houthi's threat to take action against Israel, and the actions taken by the Houthis since. President Rashad al-Alimi of the Presidential Leadership Council also expressed support for the Palestinians, though his government has done little more than pay lip service to the issue: mass demonstrations take place in towns and cities under IRG control, though, noticeably, in Southern Transitional Council (STC) strongholds, Aden in particular, they have been remarkably muted. IRG related responses reflect the influence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE over their local allies.

A REMARKABLE POTENTIAL TO CAUSE TROUBLE

As the 'international community' has failed to call for a ceasefire due to US veto, Israel's main allies have concentrated their energies on discouraging escalation of the war to other fronts, urging the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran to restrain their reactions, despite the worsening massacres and, most recently, the assassination of a senior Hamas leader in Beirut on January 2, 2024. In addition, it is noticeable that attacks on US forces in Syria and Iraq instigate immediate US military retaliation, while Houthi more effective military action has, until last week, led to no more than verbal condemnation.

Since mid-October Houthi projectiles are frequently launched towards Southern Israel. Most of them are intercepted by the US and other, including French, naval forces. Given distance and range, the Houthis do not present a serious military threat to Israel. By contrast, their ability to attack ships in the Red Sea has been the most effective international support for Palestinians. With 15% of world trade going through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, interrupting this flow impacts the world economy. It damages Egypt's already disastrous financial situation, increases shipping operational and insurance costs, and travel time by up to ten days.

CONTAINED ESCALATION

Diversion of shipping along the longer route around Africa causes delivery delays of basic and other goods. By January 3rd, more than 20% of shipping usually using this route had been diverted, including the world's major shipping fleets. The Houthis target ships with any Israeli connection [ownership, destination and even transit] which has already suffered additional costs of up to US\$ 3 billion [1], leading to threats by Israeli leaders.

In the Red Sea itself, to date, the seizure of the Galaxy Leader on November 19th has been the most flamboyant action. The video filmed by the Houthi boarding party itself is endlessly shown on western news bulletins. Holding the ship has also enabled the Houthis to turn it into a tourist attraction staging cultural events onboard. The movement has increased its attacks, including hitting the Norwegian Strinda on December 11th, the Maersk Gibraltar on December 14th and attempting to board the Maersk Hangzhou on December 31st.

After weeks of hesitation, on December 19th the US finally announced the creation of the 'Prosperity Guardian' international naval force composed of 20 states, most of whom are making at best symbolic contributions. In its early weeks of existence, it has not demonstrated added value to the numerous naval vessels clogging up the Red Sea, neither escorting convoys, nor persuading directly concerned riverain states to participate. Rather, US leadership has led to major concerned European states (France, Italy, Spain) to operate independently and call for international leadership while the comparative roles of this and the pre-existing Combined Force 153 established in April 2022 remains unclear.

The sinking of three Houthi assault boats and the killing of 10 crew members on December 31st is the first offensive military action taken by the US in the Red Sea. A subsequent UN Security Council Meeting on the issue failed to issue any decision or statement, merely blaming the Houthis for interfering with freedom of navigation, with few mentions of the rationale for their actions. As a result, the US and 12 of its closest allies issued a statement [2] threatening the Houthis with military action if they do not desist from these attacks [3].

AMERICAN AND SAUDI PARALYSIS

Why has US response to the most effective international anti-Israeli action been so slow and limited? The answer is found in the US and Saudi shared determination to end the Yemeni war. The Biden administration needs a successful foreign policy achievement in this election year: one of its early stated ambitions was to end the war in Yemen and, until recently, this seemed a possible success by comparison with other crises, given the stalemate in the ongoing war in Ukraine and the growing unpopularity of support for Israel.

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The Saudis have actively worked for years to [extricate themselves from the quagmire](#) of their military involvement in the Yemeni civil war. Since late 2022, Ansar Allah and the Saudi authorities have negotiated directly, assisted by the Omanis. In April 2023, a senior Saudi delegation officially visited Sana'a. Agreement appeared close; it did not happen. In September a senior Ansar Allah delegation visited Riyadh and was officially received by Prince Khaled bin Salman, the defense minister but, again, contrary to expectation, no agreement was announced.

The Saudis wanted their deal with the Houthis to be signed and sealed before escalation of the Gaza war made it politically impossible to proceed. They cannot publicly object to attacks against Israel, which would draw attention to their own passivity while Palestinians are being killed by the thousands and starved in a genocidal blockade. So Saudi Arabia even encouraged the US to exercise restraint in response to Houthi attacks in the Red Sea [4].

AN ILLUSIVE PEACE

Last month, UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg announced agreement had been reached and it was rumoured that it would be signed in early January. Awareness of the Saudi and US ambitions emboldened the Houthis who are fully aware that attacking them openly would seriously jeopardise an agreement to which their commitment is, in any case, doubtful. Negotiations for further prisoner exchanges between the Yemeni parties due to take place in early January have been indefinitely postponed. Houthi chief negotiator Mohammed Abdu Sallam's visit to Iran on January 1st has not interrupted Houthi Red Sea attacks which may, or may not, be assisted by the Iranian vessel which has just arrived. Following the massacre in Iran on January 3rd, Iranian leaders are unlikely to encourage the Houthis to moderate their plans.

There has been no recent mention of arrangements for a signing ceremony and recent developments have, at best, delayed it, most likely shelved it for the foreseeable future. Although the agreement would not solve the internal conflict, most Yemenis were hoping that it would be a step towards the desperately needed peace. As publicised, its substance includes a major Houthi concession that Saudi Arabia would sign as a mediator, not participant, thus removing the likelihood of the kingdom being legally liable for war crimes. It would formally be between the Houthis and the IRG, despite the latter having had no input of substance in its negotiation. In addition to a ceasefire and ending cross-border attacks by both sides, the Saudis would pay all Yemeni government staff salaries for a year including Houthi military and security forces, Hodeida ports would be fully open, and Sana'a airport would have additional destinations for flights. The Houthis would 'allow' the IRG to export oil (interrupted since November 2022 following Houthi strikes on ships in the Arabian Sea exporting ports).

The UN Special Envoy's team would be left with the task of forming economic, political and military committees to prepare 'peace' negotiations between the Yemeni parties. Such a deal would only mean ending Saudi open involvement.

On the ground it would further weaken the anti-Houthi front already suffering from squabbles and rivalries within the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and its factions. During 2023, some strengthened their positions, mainly pro-unity Tareq Saleh and the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), whose leader Al Zubaidi attended international fora alongside PLC President Al Alimi. Hadhramaut Governorate is the main site of competition between President Al Alimi and the STC, in part reflecting Saudi-Emirati rivalry. Tareq Saleh's control of the Bab al Mandab makes him the target of charm offensives by the US.

Throughout the year since the expiry of the UN-negotiated truce, fighting in Yemen remained at a low level despite some escalation in the last quarter. Following the Riyadh meeting in September, Houthi frustration was demonstrated by a cross-border drone attack, killing four Bahraini soldiers in Saudi Arabia. Intended as a warning to the Saudis, it also reflects divisions within the Houthi leadership. On September 21st, the 9th anniversary of their takeover of Sana'a, they held an exceptionally impressive three-hour military parade displaying advanced weaponry, including drones and missiles. Such a performance isn't organised overnight and was not designed to celebrate a potential 'peace' agreement. Meanwhile living conditions of Yemenis continue to deteriorate. By comparison with 2022 when the UN's Humanitarian Response Plan was financed at 55%, in 2023 it was only 38%, resulting in reduced support for the millions of Yemenis close to destitution.

In the fog of wars of early 2024, the situation in Yemen remains fraught. Houthi actions in support of Palestine may lead to military attacks on Yemen and contribute to a broadening of the conflict throughout the region. The Saudi-Houthi agreement hangs in the balance. As elsewhere prospects for 2024 are grim.

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P.S.

• ORIENT XXI. 10 JANUARY 2024:

<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/the-houthis-in-yemen-gain-the-world-s-attention,6988>

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• *Helen Lackner's articles in ORIENT XXI:*

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Footnotes

[1] « Yemeni threats disrupt about 85 % of port's profit: "Eilat" Port Dir. », Al Mayadeen, December 1, 2023.

[2] Signatories of the declaration were Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States.

[3] 'US warns Houthis to cease attacks on Red Sea vessels or face potential military action', Associated Press, January 4th, 2024.

[4] « Saudi Arabia urges US restraint as Houthis attack ships in Red Sea », Reuters, 7 décembre 2023.