

A year after hijacking the Galaxy Leader, Yemen's Houthis aren't going anywhere

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With Hamas and Hezbollah debilitated, the Yemeni group has emerged as Iran's premier non-state ally, set to continue to disrupt trade and strike Israel.

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Today marks the one-year anniversary of the Houthis' hijacking of the Galaxy Leader. On Nov. 19, 2023, military personnel from the Yemeni group descended from a helicopter onto the Israeli-owned, Japanese-operated, India-bound commercial ship, before boarding and swiftly assuming control of the vessel. With Palestinian and Yemeni flags raised, they escorted the ship back to the Houthi-held port-town of Hudaydah, and its 25 [crew](#) members — mainly Filipino, but also Ukrainian, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Mexican — were taken hostage.



The USS Carney shoots down a combination of Houthi missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles in the Red Sea, Oct. 19, 2023. (U.S. Navy Photo/Wikimedia Commons)

[Cinematic footage](#) of the operation was widely shared on social media platforms, serving as a trailer for what was to come from the group, which is also known as Ansar Allah: belligerence both abroad and at home in response to Israel's genocidal war in Gaza, and further entrenchment as a regional threat.

The past summer witnessed a [drastic increase](#) in Houthi maritime attacks on commercial vessels, despite the presence in the Red Sea of the costly multinational defense operations EUNAVFOR Aspides and Prosperity Guardian. This escalation was facilitated by new smuggling routes through the Horn of Africa, which supply the Houthis with a steady stream of weapons that Western forces have been unable to intercept.

According to [Yemeni security sources](#), these routes connect Bandar Abbas in Iran to Yemen's western coastline through ports in Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea. Between July and September, the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, where I work, [recorded](#) 19 instances of suspected smuggling along the coast of Hudaydah.

Alongside these maritime attacks, which have strangled trade in the Red Sea, the Houthis have launched direct drone and missile strikes against Israel — ostensibly to force a ceasefire in Gaza. On July 19, an explosive-laden Houthi drone hit an apartment building in Tel Aviv, [killing](#) one and wounding at least eight others. Retaliatory Israeli [airstrikes](#) on the port of Hudaydah and the Ras Al-Khatib electricity station killed six and wounded more than 80 Yemenis.

Police at the site where a Houthi ballistic missile fired from Yemen, hit an open area near Moshav Kfar Daniel, September 15, 2024. (Yossi Aloni/Flash90)

In September, the Houthis also [showcased](#) their new “Palestine 2” missile — the latest tool in their military campaign against Israel. While it is [doubtful](#) that the missile is hypersonic as claimed, it nonetheless managed to travel 2,000 kilometers in just over 11 minutes, evading Israel’s Iron Dome defense system before landing in an open area near Ben Gurion Airport.

A year after its capture, the Galaxy Leader remains in Houthi possession as a potent symbol of the group’s defiance against its U.S.-backed adversary. Recently transformed into a centerpiece of this year’s Mawlid celebrations, the hijacked ship was [illuminated](#) in green as the Houthis marked the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday with parades, religious performances, and public gatherings across their territories.

Despite [efforts](#) from the Philippines to secure their release, the ship’s crew remain in captivity. The vessel, held as both a tourist attraction and a tribute to Houthi resilience, serves as a reminder of the limited efficacy of international efforts to counter the Yemeni group, and of the enduring influence of Iran’s “forward defensive” network in the region known as the Axis of Resistance.

An Axis transformed

Israel’s [assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah](#) and the subsequent invasion of Lebanon have prompted questions about the future of Iran’s Axis of Resistance. With Hamas and Hezbollah both debilitated, the Houthis, [some have](#) suggested, could take up the mantle as Iran’s premier non-state ally in the region.

Geography prevents the Houthis from becoming another Hezbollah: Sana’a is more than 2,000 kilometers removed from Tel Aviv, limiting the threat the Houthis can pose to Israel. Neither are the Houthis a direct proxy of Iran, although their regional interests have been [remarkably aligned](#) over the past year. The Houthis’ role as part of the Axis of Resistance will therefore be different than that played by Hezbollah, but no less valuable to Iran — and one informed by the inability of international actors to decisively curtail the group’s actions.

The scene of a Houthi drone explosion in Tel Aviv, July 19, 2024. (Jamal Awad/Flash90)

Over the course of the summer, the Houthis abducted UN and NGO staff in Yemen, launched deadly strikes on Israeli cities, and attacked commercial vessels in the Red Sea, [sinking](#) one, [damaging two](#), and leaving a fourth ship [burning](#) at sea for nearly 50 days. Yet the international response has failed to significantly degrade Ansar Allah’s military capabilities, which by now are [well concealed and protected](#) by the mountainous terrain of the northern Yemeni highlands. American and Israeli airstrikes have only demonstrated to the Houthis what was already clear: neither the will nor the know-how exists to seriously threaten their power.

Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen, a senior researcher at the Sana’a Center and a leading expert on the Houthi movement, [suggests](#) that its military performance might prompt Iran to upgrade the Houthis’ responsibilities in the Axis: no longer confined to occasional drone strikes against Israel and

maritime trade, but also facilitating logistical operations among Iran's partners.

In Somalia, the Houthis have been [working closely](#) with Al-Shabaab, the Al-Qaeda-affiliated militant group, to build its capabilities — part of a [broader Houthi effort](#) to open new fronts along the African side of the Red Sea. Inside Yemen, the Houthis have facilitated the resurgence of [Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula](#) (AQAP) to [enlist](#) them in the fight against common enemies, providing training, intelligence, and weapons, including drones and rockets.

And in Iraq, they have coordinated military operations directly with Iranian-backed militias, which have [kept up](#) their attacks against Israel. This move may suggest that Iran is “reconfiguring its regional influence to be more flexible and effective,” [according](#) to Adnan Al-Jabarni, a Yemeni journalist specializing in military affairs and armed groups.



A U.S. Navy fighter jet taking off at night, part of joint U.S.-U.K. airstrikes on Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, January 12, 2024. (U.S. Navy Photo/Wikimedia Commons)

In recent months, the Houthis appear to have eased up their attacks — a further indication that the group's role in the Axis of Resistance is changing. In September and October, Armed Conflict Location Event Data ([ACLED](#)) recorded eight and five attacks respectively. These represented the lowest numbers recorded since attacks began on Oct. 19 last year, and a sharp drop from the 45 attacks recorded in June, the group's most prolific month.

Rather than deploying extensive military resources in the Red Sea, they are now [conserving](#) their drones and missiles in the event of a large-scale U.S. and Israeli attack on Iran. Initially operating as a line of defense for Hezbollah, the Houthis are now poised to defend Iran directly.

Can the Houthis be stopped?

New arms smuggling routes and expanded weapon capabilities; burgeoning alliances on both sides of the Red Sea; Russian-supplied [targeting data](#) and [surveillance technology](#) from Iran; and strategic coordination with members of the Axis of Resistance. All of these developments point toward the Houthis remaining a threat in the Red Sea region for the foreseeable future, prepared to disrupt trade and cause destruction whenever it suits the group's strategic purposes.

For Yemeni citizens, the Houthis' belligerent posture has had catastrophic consequences. In response to Houthi attacks on Tel Aviv, the Israeli military targeted the Hudaydah port, which is the entryway for more than 80 percent of Yemen's much-needed humanitarian assistance. The Ras Al-Khatib power station, which was also targeted by Israeli airstrikes, serves as the main source of electricity for households and public infrastructure in the area, including schools and hospitals.

The Houthis have also been known to systematically recruit children into their armed forces — a phenomenon that has “increased noticeably” since the October 7 Hamas attack, according to Human Rights Watch. Meanwhile, the group's forces continue to [blockade](#) Taiz, Yemen's third largest city, denying the population access to water while it fights to force Israel to lift its own siege of Gaza.

Aftermath of a Saudi-led coalition airstrike on the Dimnat Khadir district of Taiz, an area that has seen heavy fighting between Saudi-backed government forces and Houthi rebels, April 9, 2018.
(Felton Davis/Flickr)

But within Yemen, no other group has the military means or organizational capacity to threaten the Houthis, especially as they have doubled down on their repressive mode of governance. In late May, alongside intensified attacks against Israel and in the Red Sea, the Houthis initiated a brutal crackdown on civil society, [arbitrarily arresting](#) UN and other international and local NGO staff on false espionage allegations. The group carried out more abductions in August, when it [raided](#) the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Sana'a, and in October, with the [arrest](#) of an administrative officer in the U.S. Embassy.

While the Houthis are seasoned fighters, with reasonably advanced weaponries and Iran's financial backing, it is also the fragmentation and incompetence of their foes — the pro-government coalition and its international backers, Saudi Arabia and the United States — that explains the group's continued dominance within Yemen.

Saudi Arabia rained bombs down on the country for nearly eight years, in a war from which the Houthis would emerge victorious. This year, the Kingdom has sat nervously on the sideline, hoping to avoid renewed hostilities — something Abdelmalek Al-Houthi, the group's leader, [threatened](#) this August.

For their part, various UN-led diplomatic missions have allowed the Houthis to [exploit](#) peace talks and ceasefire agreements, using negotiations as an opportunity to regroup militarily. Some experts have advocated [strategic engagement](#) with the group, with red lines to ensure Yemenis' access to humanitarian aid. Others have emphasized the need to [build the military capabilities](#) and improve coordination among the fragmented anti-Houthi coalition.

But the international community seems unlikely to adopt either approach in the near future, judging by the persistence of the current strategy of disjointed airstrikes and naive diplomacy, usually in poor coordination. Israel's war may have successfully debilitated Hamas and Hezbollah, but it has not succeeded in eliminating its regional security threats entirely. For the foreseeable future, Iran looks set to increase its investments in the Houthis to ensure that the Axis persists — now from the other side of the Red Sea.

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P.S.

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<https://www.972mag.com/umm-al-hiran-destruction-zionist-demography/>
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- **Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war. The world is reeling from Israel's unprecedented onslaught on Gaza, inflicting mass devastation and death upon besieged Palestinians, as well as the atrocious attack and kidnappings by**

Hamas in Israel on October 7. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing this violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to intensify their attacks on Palestinians. The most far-right government in Israel's history is ramping up its policing of dissent, using the cover of war to silence Palestinian citizens and left-wing Jews who object to its policies.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 14 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, entrenched occupation and apartheid, and a normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is a leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists, activists, and thinkers can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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