

Yemen's Unrecognized Potential

By Zac Knaff

Just weeks ago, while sailing through the Red Sea, the Greek-owned ship the *MV Tutor*, was sunk in a horrific display of firepower. Video footage shows explosions from both sides of the ship, while the perpetrators in the background are heard cheering, giving praise to Allah. The sinking of the *MV Tutor* was a reescalation of tensions in the Red Sea by the Yemeni, Shia-militant group known as the Houthis. The group garnered attention at the beginning of the Israel-Palestine conflict, retaliating with a series of attacks on passing cargo ships which they deemed to have ties with Israel and the West. Since the beginning of the conflict on October 7th, Houthi-inspired attacks have been effective in causing widespread damage for global shipping. The attacks have also resulted in several fatalities on cargo ships, all of whom have no involvement in the Israel-Hamas war. The group's violence, persistence and impact cannot be understated.

Despite the significance of their attacks, Houthi actions in the Red Sea have been underreported compared to other ongoing conflicts. It appears that the perception of the attacks in and around Yemen are deemed of lesser importance - simply a series of sporadic terrorist attacks. Despite over 60 attacks in the Red Sea since 2023, an analysis of *Google trends* demonstrates that search results for the Houthi movement have been few and far between with only a single major spike in attention during the second week of January when the US sent airstrikes into Yemen. Granted, the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza have been far deadlier, but the attacks by Houthi rebels hold the capacity to affect more people. Following media trends leads to contradictory conclusions, however. If Houthi actions in the Red Sea were objectively less significant than either the war in Ukraine or the war in Gaza, this can't explain the direct military responses of the U.S. and its allies. None of the other on-going conflicts have received that sort of attention.

The Houthis have access to one of the most significant chokepoints in the entire world, holding the opportunity to open a Pandora's Box if left unchecked. The group's possibilities in this region appear numerous, and the attacks on shipping are simply a glimpse into an undesirable future of chronic instability. These opportunities to damage the West would take focus away from the Russian bombardment of Ukraine and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. If the current US

administration puts the Houthis in the backseat, dire circumstances will follow. This paper seeks to elucidate several areas that, without sufficient responses and robust policies from the international community, Houthis may severely disrupt. By understanding these potential weak points, effective policy making can help to eliminate such problems before irreparable harm is caused.

Shipping Disrupted

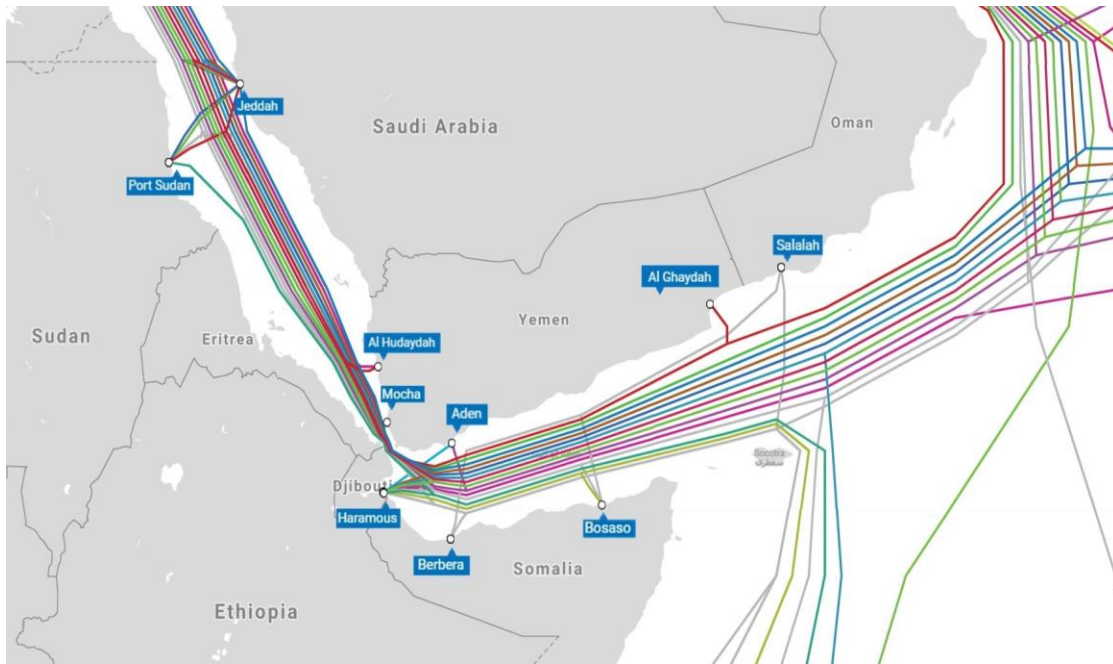
The most commonly cited problem caused by the Houthis has been their attacks on cargo ships passing through the Red Sea. Using Iranian-made weapons, with the guidance of the *Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (IRGC), any ship passing through is, and has been, at risk of being targeted. While many of these attacks have been sporadic, the Houthis have been effective at causing chaos for the United States, who have high stakes in the international shipment of goods. For Houthi leaders, this appears to be a calculated move. While the attacks have been aimed at any ship passing through, regardless of their diplomatic ties, the Houthis have been able to take a big hit on the United States.

Undersea Cables

Undersea cables have been used for over a century connecting historically isolated regions, helping them overcome their geographical limits via these cables. Passing through the Bab al Mandab Strait are multiple undersea cables. Some of these cables are no more than 100m deep at some points, as reported by Data Center Dynamics (2024), putting them in extreme vulnerability to disruption.

For most undersea cables damage to them isn't uncommon. According to the Center of Strategic & International Studies, 150-200 cables break per year (2021), mostly by fishing boats

mis-dropping their anchor. This statistic provides an unintentional blueprint to how the Houthis could cause disruption to regional connectivity.



(Map of Under-Sea Cables by the *Middle East Eye* 2024)

The US has had a history of dealing with Yemeni skiffs, like when the USS Cole was nearly sunk thanks to a skiff loaded with explosives. What that unfortunate occurrence should show, is that even though the Houthis don't have high-grade weaponry like a submersible vehicle to damage the undersea cables, they can cause just as much damage with what they have. Furthermore, the fragility of the undersea cables makes this potential avenue even more deadly. Combined with the Houthis attacks on vessels, the possibility of intentional interference with the undersea cables becomes a potential reality.

Somali Friends?

Across the Bab al Mandab strait, significant political developments have occurred. Within the last 6 months, Ethiopia and the globally unrecognized proto-state of Somaliland, have been in talks about trading recognition for port access. Ethiopia, longing for a sea port to the Red Sea,

views Somaliland as an unpassable opportunity for realizing this dream; for Somaliland, this is a small price to pay for international recognition.

The discussions between Ethiopia and Somaliland could have a significant impact on Yemen and the Houthis. Between Yemen and Somalia, trade (legally and illegally) has flourished with the exchange of weapons, *Qat*, and even people. The Berbera-Aden trade corridor has a long history of activity and has produced economic benefits for both countries. With the global recognition of Somaliland, things could change.

While gaining recognition by one country might not create an immediate change, this trade corridor would be at the behest of Somalilander decision-making. Somalilander culture is one built on self-reliance, striving to separate itself from Mogadishu. The proto-state is a self-made success story, being exceptionally stable compared to its southern counterpart. Given this culture of self-reliance from the rest of Somalia, it remains a real possibility that this trade corridor would close. For Somaliland, the means do not justify the end, regardless of the income it would produce.

This development presents a major problem for Houthi leadership...but also an opportunity. Given Somalilander culture of going against Mogadishu decision-making, the trade that once flourished between Yemen and Somalia would likely cease, cutting off a vital source of income for both countries. Houthis could choose to engage in bilateral cooperation with Somalia, either with the government or non-national groups like Al-Shabaab. Regardless, this lucrative trade corridor, on top of their shared history, could be enough to create a regional alliance. Whether that be through hijacking ships like the Somalis, or often blowing them up like the Houthis, there is significant risk involved with a cross-strait alliance.

Possible cooperation between the Houthis and Al-Shabaab may provide different opportunities. Within the last month, weapons have been exchanged between the two groups and the Houthis have aided Al-Shabaab in regaining territory claimed by government forces. While Al-Shabaab is concentrated more to the South, and the Houthis are yet to have control of Aden, the threat of a joint-operation in the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al Mandab strait should not be taken lightly.

A Shia Oasis

The Houthis' grounding in Zaydi Shi'ism sets them apart from other terror groups in the region. In the Gulf, there are only a few offshoots of Shia Islam that are practiced, in countries like Bahrain and Oman, albeit in very limited numbers. What this demographic insinuates is that the Houthis are essentially an oasis of Shiism in a sea of Wahhabism, making them an asset to the Iranians.

Evidence has proven that Iran is backing Hamas in Israel, but the main defining difference is that Hamas is a Sunni group. Despite their shared belief in Allah and their mutual-hatred of Israel, the similarities end there. This essentially means that Hamas is a pawn in the eyes of its Iranian overseers. The Houthis however, are brothers of the same kin. The revolutionary practices that present-day Iran was founded on have significant importance in the Houthis. Saudi Arabia, bordering the northern part of Yemen, is the biggest ideological competitor to Iran. The majority of the Arabian Gulf is Sunni, making the Houthis a valuable bastion of Shia beliefs. In the minds of the Iranian administration, the Houthis are a necessary political asset in their goals of not only continuing the spread of Shiism in a majority Sunni region, but also in eliminating Western presence.

Unrecognized Potential

The unrecognized potential of the Houthis is encapsulated by these different possibilities, making the movement equivalent to an unsharpened blade. Why Houthi leadership has yet to act on these opportunities remains murky, but it seems to be a mix of unfocused leadership and a possible lack of direction from the Iranians - whom it is suspected they rely on for guidance. The lack of diversified action by the group signifies not an unwillingness to act, but a lack of know-how. Strikes on cargo ships in the Red Sea are sporadic and many of the ships have been neither aligned with the West nor connected to Israel. Perhaps the Houthi movement lacks direction.

Indeed, previous points raised further validate this hypothesis. Given the fragility of undersea cables, it seems strange that the group has yet to act. Equally, Greater-Somalia holds similar beliefs about the West as the Houthis do; while also having the option of collaboration with Al-Shabaab. But there is an evident lack of action by Houthis in engaging with new bilateral relationships. Finally, the Houthi Shiite belief system gives themselves leverage with their possible Iranian overseers. The ideological similarities between the Houthis and Iran give them a sense of kinship that other proxies, like Hamas, don't have; giving them leverage that could be used to gain more munitions, IRGC personnel, and even increased regional focus. Yet again, Houthis have yet to act on this. If this foothold were to be realized, exacerbated by the reactions from the West, it seems likely that the Houthis would hedge their bets on baiting the US into a wider conflict. Fortunately, the group seems content with maintaining its current strategy, limiting the scope of their risk.

The tension in the region could very easily drag the United States into another protracted conflict. Fleshing out possible courses of action, while also understanding the underlying causes and potential goals of the Houthis, is a necessary next step in dealing with the group. The means to this end begin with interpreting the potential risks seriously, acknowledging the volatility of the region, and increasing regional focus on the Houthis. Upholding the current freedoms and way of life is what is at stake, not failing to implement democracy elsewhere.

With so much at stake, The Houthis' potential to cause damage in the Red Sea and around the world goes well beyond the points mentioned. Any number of possibilities could spell disaster. Only by acknowledging these realities and creating bold, effective and long-term strategies to address them, can these threats be managed.

Zac Knapp is an in-coming junior at the University of Idaho. He is double majoring in International Studies and Political Science, with minors in International Politics and French. He is also a part of U of I's Cross Country and Track Team.

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