



Houthi Deterrence and the Horn of Africa: Rethinking Washington's Red Sea Policy

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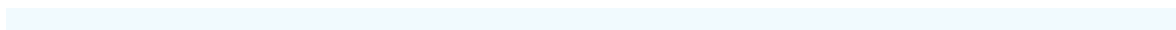
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iii. Map



Description: 'Map showing the location of the Gulf of Aden, located between Yemen and Somalia. Nearby bodies of water include the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.'

Source: Norman Einstein

iv. Abstract

The paper examines the escalating crisis in the Red Sea, triggered by the Houthi movement's attacks on commercial shipping routes through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. It highlights the strategic importance of this maritime corridor, facilitating the transit of 10-15% of the world's commerce, and the significant repercussions of the Houthi attacks on global trade, particularly for the Horn of Africa. The paper discusses the two dominant responses to the crisis: the U.S. and its allies' call for punitive intervention to restore maritime stability, and the opposing view that calls for a cessation of hostilities in Gaza as a prerequisite for peace in the Red Sea. Analyzing the limitations of the prevailing U.S. policy, this paper critiques the effectiveness of punitive actions and the failure to address the root causes of the conflict, including the situation in Gaza. It recommends a shift towards non-escalatory political strategies and greater engagement with humanitarian efforts, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive approach that considers the broader geopolitical dynamics, including the Iran-Houthi relationship, and the humanitarian implications for Yemen and the Horn of Africa. This paper advocates for collaborative regional efforts and diplomatic dialogues, highlighting the role of Red Sea littoral states and regional blocs in de-escalating tensions and promoting stability.

1. Introduction

The Red Sea is in crisis. Since November 2023, Yemen's Houthi movement— or Ansar Allah— has launched attacks on ships traversing the vital Bab el-Mandeb trade artery, through which 10-15% of the world's commerce flows. The security dilemma has forced shipping corporations to reroute vessels, opting to circumvent South Africa's Cape of Good Hope in order to avoid the Red Sea, extending transit times by up to several months and incurring significant additional costs. The Houthi movement has indicated that they would suspend Red Sea attacks when Israel stands down in Gaza, although it has become abundantly clear that these attacks are also driven by the promise of domestic and regional clout.

The bellicose Houthi strategy has shattered the perception that the movement only poses a threat to Yemen or the Middle East,¹ as economic shockwaves reverberated far beyond the immediate region. While disruptions to trade routes and supply chains have primarily hurt the pockets of Europe and Asia, the Horn of Africa has not escaped the contagion.² Grain and fertilizer imports from Ukraine and Eastern Europe are crucial components of East Africa's food supply, and the Houthi attacks place these vital resources at risk. For a region particularly susceptible to global economic shocks, the prolonged transit times have resulted in higher food prices and reduced availability, aggravating the Horn's pervasive food insecurities.³

Urgent action is imperative to address the escalating crisis and safeguard the stability of the Red Sea region. Failure to do so risks setting a dangerous precedent— allowing other actors to replicate the tactics

employed by the Houthis— thereby opening a destabilizing trend wherein state and non-state powers seek to impose violent doctrines on rivals in international waterways. For the Horn, the ensuing chaos compounds existing challenges, including the fragile security environment resulting from tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia over the contentious January 2024 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), as well as the potential delay of the anticipated monetary normalization path by the U.S. Federal Reserve.⁴

Amid this critical juncture, two dominant schools of thought emerged. The first, advocated by the U.S. and its allies, argues that punitive intervention is necessary to restore maritime stability. Conversely, the second viewpoint contends that punitive measures are inadequate as a deterrent and pose a threat to the humanitarian conditions of vulnerable populations in Yemen, asserting that effective deterrence should instead begin with a cessation of hostilities in Gaza.

Washington and its allies have

¹ M Ali Thamer, B Dogan-Akkas; Jan. 2024, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

² D Van Dalen, M Ndhlovu, R Gopaldas; Feb. 2024, *Institute for Security Studies*

³ T Walker; Jan. 2024, *Institute for Security Studies*

⁴ D Van Dalen, M Ndhlovu, R Gopaldas; Feb. 2024, *Institute for Security Studies*

responded to attacks with punitive measures, deploying military personnel to the Red Sea and administering over 400 strikes on Houthi targets across Yemen.⁵ While the U.S. strategy is ostensibly aimed at maintaining peace and safeguarding international commercial interests, the effectiveness of this approach has been discernibly lackluster, and a return to the status quo ante remains elusive.

Horn of Africa states must advocate for the latter conjecture, as it will ensure the safe passage of critically important food shipments to the Horn, simultaneously safeguarding vulnerable populations in Yemen from an exacerbated humanitarian crisis.

This paper provides a brief background on the Houthi movement, and measures the economic implications of their attacks. It will then summarise why the U.S. riposte is an ineffective deterrent – threatening to aggravate the Horn of Africa's economic and humanitarian vulnerabilities – citing its failure to address the situation in Gaza, its tacit emboldening of Houthi domestic and international ambitions, and the threat it poses to Yemen's vulnerable humanitarian conditions.

⁵ *The Business Standard*; Apr. 2024

2. Background

2.1 Ansar Allah

The group, widely recognised for their slogan “God is the greatest, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory to Islam,” traces its origins to a social movement that emerged in the Sana’a governorate in the 1990s. Led by Badreddin al-Houthi, a Zaydi scholar, the movement gained traction from his sermons that criticized Western states for invading Muslim territories under the pretext of combating terrorism.⁶

The Houthi movement emerged as a response to the deeply unequal Yemeni society presided over by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, seeking a more egalitarian system for all Yemenis. Persecution under Saleh’s regime fueled their anti-establishment radicalization, culminating in the killing of Badreddin’s son— Hussein al-Houthi— by Saleh’s troops in 2004, which paradoxically strengthened the movement. It was around this time that they began forging ties with Tehran, drawing on Iran’s Shia majority for support.

Following the Arab Spring in 2011, the movement – advocating for Yemen’s Shia Muslim minority— reached a zenith of influence. Their popularity soared amidst widespread disillusionment with Saleh’s successor— President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi— whose installation in February 2012 via uncontested elections was largely facilitated by Saudi Arabia. Hadi’s tenure was marked by his oversight of the national dialogue conference, which aimed to unite Yemen’s diverse groups

⁶ K Sharif, A Moaiad; 2022, *Ahlulbayt Originals. Anti Imperialist Archive*

and promote inclusivity among women, youth, and marginalised communities, with a vision of state federalization. However, discontent grew as the perceived economic stagnation and lack of job opportunities persisted, as many Yemenis felt worse off than before the revolution. The Houthis, concerned by the prospect of being marginalised and relegated to their impoverished province, capitalized on the widespread disaffection with the outcomes of the national dialogue conference, mobilizing further protests in July 2014.

Since 2014, the Houthis have maintained control over a significant portion of northern Yemen, resisting the military intervention led by Saudi Arabia, aimed at curtailing Houthi influence and restoring the internationally recognized Yemeni government to power. This juncture saw the Houthis attract greater investment from Tehran, and the conflict rapidly evolved into one of a proxy nature between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The successive despotic administrations and the subsequent protracted conflict has seen Yemen’s humanitarian crisis reach unprecedented levels of severity. The United Nations characterizes it as the most dire in modern history— estimating that 24 million people were in desperate need of humanitarian assistance in 2022— and malnutrition, water scarcity, and famine remain pervasive.

On November 19th, the Houthi group seized control of the Galaxy Leader,

a merchant ship associated with an Israeli businessman, and took hostage its captain and crew.⁷ Subsequently, on November 23rd, the Houthis initiated a series of coordinated attacks using drones, ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and small boats, to assault commercial ships in the Gulf of Aden.⁸ Since then, nearly 50 vessels from a dozen different nations have fallen victim to Houthi attacks, although the group's spokesman Yahya Saree has stated that these operations solely target ships linked to Israel, conducted in solidarity with the 'just cause of the Palestinian people.'⁹

The Houthis are driven by strong domestic and ideological motives, acting in concert with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,¹⁰ aspiring to position themselves as pragmatic allies.¹¹ While there is no evidence of the Houthis acting on behalf of tête-à-tête dialogue with Tehran (Iran has denied allegations of direct support for the group), there is likely a degree of coordination, as evidenced by the presence of an Iranian intelligence vessel in the Gulf of Aden in mid-January 2024.¹²

2.2 The Geo-Economic Implications of the Houthi Strategy

The annual maritime trade between Europe and Asia, transiting through the Red Sea, amounts to a staggering one trillion USD.¹³ Analysts have noted

7 I Debre, J Gambrell; Nov. 2023, *AP News*

8 *International Crisis Group*; Jan. 2024

9 *Al Jazeera*; Feb. 2024

10 *International Crisis Group*; Jan. 2024

11 Betul Dogan-Akkas, Ankara University, via *Al Jazeera*

12 *International Crisis Group*; Jan. 2024

13 A Rondos, *International Crisis Group*, December 2023

a significant surge in cargo insurance rates for Bab el-Mandeb voyages. Traditionally, these rates accounted for only 0.6% of cargo value, but they have now soared to as high as 2%, compounded by additional war risk premiums imposed by insurers. The consequences of reduced traffic through the Suez Canal are particularly dire for Egypt, with revenue losses amounting to 40% compared to the previous year.¹⁴

According to Drewry's World Container Index, which monitors the average cost of transporting a 40-foot container on cargo ships, prices skyrocketed from \$1,521 per container on December 14, 2023, to \$3,777 per container by January 18, 2024.¹⁵

Horn states are heavily dependent on seaborne trade through the Bab el-Mandeb. Houthi-facilitated incidents have led to a sharp decline in operations at two critical regional ports: Djibouti, and Port Sudan. On January 19th, Danish shipping giant Maersk suspended bookings to Djibouti from Asia, the Middle East, Oceania, and other East African states.¹⁶

For Ethiopia, the Port of Djibouti– the largest port on the Horn– plays a vital role. As a landlocked country, Ethiopia relies on the Addis-Djibouti corridor– a World Bank-supported infrastructure project– for 95% of its trade by volume,¹⁷ which it uses for its exports

14 T Denamiel, M Schleich, W A Reinsch, W Todman; Jan. 2024, *CSIS*

15 *Drewry Supply Chain Advisors*; Mar. 2024

16 N Olsen, G Jones; Mar. 2024, *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*

17 *Ibid*; Mar. 2024, *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*

to the U.S. and Europe, valued at an annual \$334 million and \$851.8 million, respectively.¹⁸ Escalating shipping costs limit Ethiopia's imports and exports, which restrains the recuperation of its moribund economy.

Disruptions have also exacerbated Port Sudan's vulnerabilities. Since the outbreak of war in Sudan in April 2023, regional trade hub Port Sudan stands as the country's last economic bastion, largely unaffected by the conflict. S&P Global's Jihane Boudiaf reports that almost 90% of Sudan's \$11 billion annual exports and 30% of its GDP flow through this port, destined for Middle Eastern or Asian markets via the Bab el-Mandeb.¹⁹ It has served as a crucial destination for humanitarian corridors into Sudan during this tumultuous period, and these corridors are now threatened by the Red Sea crisis.

East African countries heavily rely on wheat imports from Ukraine via the Red Sea to compensate for insufficient domestic production. Djibouti and Somalia rely entirely on imported wheat, while Kenya and Sudan also have high levels of dependence, with 86% and 77% of their wheat supply being imported, respectively.²⁰ The adverse effects of Red Sea insecurity on the Horn are compounded by both the Russian invasion of Ukraine and unprecedentedly low levels of rainfall across East Africa, factors contributing to severe droughts, impacting approximately 26 million people in the region.

¹⁸ Trading Economics; Apr. 2024

¹⁹ J Boudiaf; Feb. 2022, *S&P Global Market Intelligence*

²⁰ N Olsen, G Jones; Mar. 2024, *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*

The concentration of military resources by Red Sea stakeholders to counter the Houthis in the strait has led to a noticeable security vacuum in the waters south of the Bab el-Mandeb. The vacuum is being exploited by ideologically and politically amorphous groups,²¹ as evidenced by the hijacking of 18 vessels by Somali pirates in the Gulf of Aden since late November 2023.²² Perception plays a critical role in regional security terms, and Houthi attacks have shattered any notion of maritime safety. It is Horn-based states that stand to suffer the most from the ensuing vacuum.

²¹ D Van Dalen, M Ndhlovu, R Gopaldas; Feb. 2024, *Institute for Security Studies*

²² *Horn of Africa Maritime Security Center*; Apr. 2024

3. U.S. National Security Policy

In late December 2023, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin unveiled "Operation Prosperity Guardian," a multinational coalition aimed at deterring the Houthi threat to maritime commerce. U.S. Vice Admiral Brad Cooper emphasised, "We will not allow the Houthis to hold this strait hostage," as over 7,000 U.S. troops were deployed to the Red Sea.²³ The coalition includes participation from Bahrain, Canada, France, the Netherlands, the U.K., and Norway, expanding the scope of the Combined Task Force, a multinational naval force established in 2009 in response to piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia.

On December 31st, the task force sank small Houthi boats, resulting in the death of ten Houthi fighters after the Yemeni group fired on U.S. Navy helicopters. On January 10th, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted a resolution demanding an immediate cessation of Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea.²⁴ Overnight between January 11th and 12th, the U.S. and U.K. quantitatively administered targeted strikes on specific Houthi military-purposed locations, reportedly killing over 20 of the group's members. The U.S. Central Command justified these strikes as defensive measures aimed at reducing the Houthi capacity for further attacks on both military and commercial vessels. The Houthis have condemned the strikes as a flagrant attack on Yemen, and have raised concerns about an escalation to the specter of conflict after issuing threats

of retaliation.²⁵ On January 17th, the U.S. Department of State designated the Houthis as a terrorist group.²⁶

The U.S. views itself as the world's dominant maritime power and sees safeguarding the freedom of the sea as its core responsibility.²⁷ The White House knows that decisive action maintains this perception, fearing that signs of indecision will be exploited. Additionally, the U.S. hopes that tactical strikes on Houthi arms depots may disrupt Tehran's support for the movement, concurrently mitigating the threat of replicated acts in the Persian Gulf, which serves as a crucial source of the oil supply chains for both the U.S. and Europe.

23 N O'Donnell; Feb. 2024, *60 Minutes*

24 *International Crisis Group*; Jan. 2024

25 *Ibid*; Jan. 2024

26 A J Blinken; Jan. 2024, *U.S Department of State*

27 H Andrew Schwartz, E A Cohen; Jan. 2024, *CSIS*

4. *The Limitations of U.S. Policy*

4.1 An Effective Deterrent?

In terms of reestablishing the Red Sea order, punitive action against Yemen has proven to be a fruitless endeavor. Despite U.S. and U.K. strikes, the persistence of Houthi aggression reflects the group's recognition that disrupting global supply chains garners international attention and, as they fail to provide essential services to populations under their control, diverts focus from their incompetent governance.²⁸ Therefore, strikes implicitly reinforce the Houthi modus operandi, as they view the retaliatory response from the U.S. and U.K. as validation of the effectiveness of their strategy in causing economic harm to Israel-aligned states. Moreover, confrontation with the U.S. is not perceived as an existential threat, but rather a means to enhance their domestic legitimacy and regional clout.²⁹

Ankara University's Betül Dogan-Akkas told Al-Jazeera,

*'I have a huge doubt that [U.S. and U.K. strikes] will stop the attacks on the Red Sea or make a fundamental military difference... we have not seen even half of what they are capable of doing in the regard of launching attacks, nor will the designation of the Houthis as a terror group from the United States [deter future attacks].'*³⁰

The strategic aim of the Houthis is to amplify their global visibility, and

strikes on Yemen serve precisely that purpose. Rather than deterring their actions, such strikes paradoxically embolden the group, elevating their status from a domestic player to a regional force. This effect mirrors that of Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen's civil war in 2015, wherein the destructive bombing campaigns and naval blockades facilitated by Riyadh empowered the Houthis to portray themselves as legitimate defenders of Yemeni sovereignty against foreign aggression.³¹

The ongoing U.S. and U.K. approach naively frames the Red Sea crisis as solely a Houthi issue— failing to comprehensively address the broader Iranian dimension— which may inadvertently invite greater Iranian intervention, amplifying the proxy dimension of the conflict and complicating the role of multilateral actors seeking resolution and humanitarian stability.³² Administering airstrikes against Iranian targets in Yemen does not effectively counter Tehran's patronage, but instead threatens escalation and encourages the Persian Gulf state to arm the Houthis with even more advanced weaponry, just as they did during the Saudi intervention.

Punitive measures on Yemeni soil are likely to provoke the Houthis into intensifying their maritime attacks and expanding the range of targeted vessels. While Houthi military capabilities pale

28 T Denamiel, M Schleich, W A Reinsch, W Todman; Jan. 2024, CSIS

29 Ibid; Jan. 2024, CSIS

30 B Dogan-Akkas; Feb. 2024, via Al Jazeera

31 F Abo Al Asrar; Mar. 2024, via Vox

32 M Ali Thamer, B Dogan-Akkas; Jan. 2024, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

in comparison to that of the U.S. and its allies, the group's utilization of unmanned weapons enables them to inflict considerable damage³³

4.2 Failure to Address Gaza

In late October, Washington proposed the inclusion of shipping security as a term in Saudi Arabia's ongoing peace dialogue with the Houthis. The Houthis rejected this proposal, asserting that their military activities in the Red Sea are directly tied to the situation in Gaza, rather than its dormant conflict with Saudi Arabia.³⁴ According to Farea al-Muslimi of Chatham House, the Gaza issue stands as the primary motive driving Houthi actions, explicitly stating that a ceasefire and increased humanitarian aid to the strip are prerequisites for ending hostilities.³⁵ Al-Muslimi further suggests that the Houthis' current military offensives have garnered widespread support from Yemenis—driven by sympathy for the Palestinian cause within Yemen's body politic—even amongst those who may otherwise oppose the group.

As long as the international community remains unable to pressure Israel into suspending its assault on Gaza, the Houthis will continue to weaponize the suffering of Palestinians to attract domestic support and international attention.³⁶

4.3 Addressing the Impact on the Horn

Airstrikes not only risks protracting Houthi activity but also carries the potential to escalate regional tensions.

Such actions could aggravate humanitarian crises in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, for whom maritime corridors are essential. The deterioration of bilateral ties between Ethiopia and Somalia following the signing of the MoU further underscores the metaphorical powder keg beneath the Horn.³⁷

For Horn-based infrastructure development projects relying on European shipping containers, Red Sea insecurity exerts a significant toll. Delivery timelines—usually spanning one-and-a-half months—now require a minimum of 4-and-a-half months to reach their destination and elicit 100% cost increases per container, minimum. For shipments of food supplies and essential medicines, the protracted delivery timeline threatens expiry dates. Markets sourcing Belgian, German, and British electrical supplies have seen prices soar, as cables and solar panels are now twice as expensive to ship as they were under the status quo ante.³⁸ In some instances, European materials fail to arrive altogether. Even for containers that do not transit the Red Sea—such as those from India and China—insurance rates have seen 33% increases. Additionally, the Horn has witnessed a 15% spike in oil prices since December, attributed to constrained oil supply corridors from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The pre-existing black market demand for Iranian oil has capitalized on this, emerging as a fierce competitor.³⁹

Amidst the current geopolitical landscape, Somaliland emerges as an unexpected but potentially significant

33 *International Crisis Group*; Jan. 2024

34 *International Crisis Group*; Jan. 2024

35 F al-Muslimi; Feb. 2024, via *Al Jazeera*

36 S Samir, M Hussein; Mar. 2024, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

37 M El-Bendary; Jan. 2024, *Euro News*

38 B Mohamed, *interview*; Apr. 2024

39 *Ibid*; Apr. 2024

conduit for effective U.S. strategy. With a sizable Yemeni diaspora and a strategically advantageous location adjacent to the Gulf of Aden, a revitalized security partnership offers tactical impetus. Since May 2023, security cooperation between the U.S. and Somaliland has been somewhat at odds over President Muse Bihi Abdi's dealing with the SSC-Khaatumo in the Sool region, with former U.S. Ambassador to Somalia stating that the U.S. "Deemed it inappropriate to carry out [collaborative military exercises and training] in Berbera amid the ongoing conflict in Laascaanood."⁴⁰

To return to the status quo ante, the U.S. should reconsider Somaliland as a strategic partner, considering that U.S. measures in Yemen have inadvertently empowered the very groups they aim to constrain. In a testimony to the U.S. Congress in 2022, Senator James Risch advocated for a bilateral security partnership with Somaliland, acknowledging its strategic significance due to its proximity to the Gulf of Aden, before highlighting its democratic credentials and relative stability amidst a volatile neighborhood.⁴¹ A revitalized partnership would serve to leverage the port of Berbera as a humanitarian access point to the Horn, degrade the terrorist threat posed by al-Shabaab, and counter the malign influence of Iran and its proxies.

A holistic analysis that observes interests and security implications beyond the Arabian peninsula is essential for a calculus that addresses the domino effect that the Red Sea

dilemma has inflicted on the wider region. In the aftermath of the latest clashes between Western powers and the Houthis, the Yemeni group's perseverance poses an existential threat to Horn-based markets and vulnerable populations. To protect these markets and at-risk groups, the U.S. should adopt an approach that considers the strait's littoral African constituents: leaning into its relationship with Djibouti, renewing cooperation with Somaliland, and collaborating with the East African regional bloc, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

4.4 The Houthi Domestic & Regional Rationale

An internationally recognized Houthi government does not serve the interests of the vast majority of Yemenis. Houthi governance raises serious concerns insofar as human rights violations and marginalization of minority groups. Reports indicate that implementation of torture methods, forced disappearances of the regime's critics, and suppression of women's advocacy groups are commonplace.⁴²

Before the onset of the Red Sea crisis, the Houthis lacked international recognition and legitimacy, with limited domestic support beyond their own followers.⁴³ After their initial attacks on ships, the group experienced a significant increase in membership by leveraging their purported support for the Palestinian cause in recruitment campaigns. The Gaza crisis has provided the Houthis with an opportunity to divert attention

⁴⁰ *Hiiraan Online*; Jun. 2023

⁴¹ U.S. Senate, 117th Congress, 2nd Session; 2022

⁴² F Abo Al Asrar; Mar. 2024, via *Vox*

⁴³ *Ibid*; Mar. 2024, via *Vox*

away from mounting discontent in areas under their control, arresting opponents on charges of collusion with Israel and the U.S.⁴⁴

Furthermore, the Houthis seek to gain legitimacy on the global stage by attracting international attention and demonstrating their relevance to larger actors,⁴⁵ hoping for recognition as the legitimate governing authority of Yemen. Even as a recognised terrorist entity, the group's demonstrated influence in the Red Sea enhances their diplomatic sway and bolsters their claim to power in other parts of Yemen.⁴⁶

Red Sea insecurity could potentially hinder the significant ground made in the Yemen-Saudi Arabia peace process. The withdrawal of Saudi military forces from Yemen and the launch of an intra-Yemeni political process are the key elements of discussions between Riyadh and the Houthis. An escalation of regional tensions could jeopardize Riyadh-Houthi dialogue, potentially leading to delays or a collapse of negotiations.⁴⁷ If the Houthis feel emboldened by the U.S. response to their Red Sea attacks, they may exercise greater leverage in the incumbent peace negotiation process, and will therefore be inclined to make new demands of their Saudi interlocutors. This threatens to fracture the UN-led peace process following initial engagement between Saudi Arabia and Yemeni factions, and

effectively freeze the political track.⁴⁸

4.5 Threat to Yemen's Humanitarian Landscape

Embroiled in conflict for over nine years, Yemen remains mired in what the UN once deemed the worst humanitarian catastrophe in modern history. The toll has been staggering, with over 350,000 lives lost to violence, famine, and inadequate access to medical services.⁴⁹ The U.S. policy of strikes and Red Sea militarization poses new threats to Yemen's already fragile state, as it constrains vital humanitarian corridors established since the April 2022 ceasefire.

Yemen's fishing industry – upon which tens of thousands of families depend for their livelihoods – faces jeopardy as a result of Red Sea militarization. Any disruption to fishing practices will have far-reaching consequences and escalate existing food insecurities for critically vulnerable populations.

44 *International Crisis Group*; Jan. 2024

45 T Denamiel, M Schleich, W A Reinsch, W Todman; Jan. 2024, *CSIS*

46 M Ali Thamer, B Dogan-Akkas; Jan. 2024, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

47 *International Crisis Group*; Jan. 2024

48 *Ibid*; Jan. 2024

49 K Sharif, A Moaiad; 2022, *Ahlulbayt Originals. Anti Imperialist Archive*

5. Recommendations Going Forward

The implementation of air strikes and punitive measures in response to Houthi attacks may hold symbolic significance for Western nations and potentially curb some Houthi capabilities,⁵⁰ but their overall effectiveness is demonstrably constrained, and serves to exacerbate and protract the Red Sea security dilemma.

- **Houthi attacks are explicitly linked to the Gaza crisis, therefore it is imperative for all stakeholders to push for a ceasefire, and facilitate an increase of humanitarian aid.** Ending the war may prompt the Houthis to revert to the status quo ante, enabling a restoration of Red Sea norms. Anything short of a ceasefire in Gaza will result in a perpetuation of the group's threat to Red Sea security.⁵¹ An assertive Washington stance vis-a-vis Israel would demonstrate its sincerity as an actor seeking non-escalatory regional resolutions, and provide it with a stronger platform to reconfigure the regional security paradigm.
- **Washington and its allies must privilege non-escalatory political strategies.** Punitive measures against the Houthis inadvertently strengthen the group's position both domestically and regionally, mirroring the unintended consequences of the 2015 Saudi intervention. While the urgency for deterrence is legitimate, it is crucial to approach the situation with a nuanced analysis of the Iran-Houthi relationship. Resorting to military force as a first-track approach will not provide lasting solutions to the manifold dynamics surrounding this relationship.⁵²
- **Washington and its allies should actively engage with humanitarian organisations operating within Houthi-controlled Yemen.** It is imperative to structure policy with consideration for the existing humanitarian crisis and collaborate with multilateral organisations to ensure that any punitive measures— including sanctions— do not exacerbate adverse conditions of civilian populations. Failing to consider these factors will lead to a prolonged and intensified humanitarian crisis in Yemen.⁵³
- **U.S. and U.K. defence priorities should focus on the Red Sea, not Yemen proper.** Currently, the U.S. has effectively neutralized the vast majority of Houthi projectiles, albeit at a considerable financial cost (Much attention has been drawn to the expenses associated with U.S. anti-drone and ballistic missile technology compared to the cost of the weapons used by the Houthis). Wes Rumbaugh from CSIS argues that the focus should not be sole-

50 *International Crisis Group*; Jan. 2024

51 *International Crisis Group*; Jan. 2024

52 B Y Saab; Jan. 2024, *Chatham House*

53 E Al-Ketbi; Jan. 2024, *Emirates Policy Center*

ly on the cost comparison between projectiles and the technology that intercepts them, but instead consider whether these interceptors enable the U.S. to pursue its Red Sea security objectives effectively.⁵⁴ In terms of achieving deterrence, intercepting Houthi projectiles is a less provocative option than administering air strikes.

- **Deterrence measures must take into account the delicate Yemeni civil war ceasefire.** Safeguarding civilian populations may necessitate a reconfiguration of the roles of multilateral actors and the international community in upholding the ceasefire. Riyadh's cooperation is crucial to sustain the ceasefire.
- **Red Sea littoral states and regional blocs— including IGAD and the GCC— should take advantage of their strategic position, and lead collaborative efforts.** Joint patrols, information-sharing mechanisms, and capacity-building initiatives that effectively prevent or mitigate further escalation of conflict, can safeguard regional interests. Oman, known for its diplomatic pragmatism, is well-positioned to coordinate a GCC strategy to facilitate diplomatic dialogue between Gulf actors and the Houthi group in Yemen. Muscat can play a pivotal role in de-escalating tensions and promoting regional stability.
- **Djibouti and Egypt should leverage their unique placement in multilateral blocs to pursue diplomatic solutions.** Egypt— a BRICS member, with Iran— should leverage

its position to navigate the complex regional dynamics. Meanwhile, Djibouti plays a crucial role in seeking reconciliation between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa following the MoU. With relationships with global powers such as the U.S., France, and China, Djibouti can advocate for solutions that safeguard the commercial interests of the Horn of Africa. Arab states, particularly those bordering the Red Sea, should prioritize diplomatic efforts to halt the conflict in Gaza and explore the establishment of security and political frameworks centered around the Red Sea region.

- **Washington should reconsider bilateral security cooperation with Somaliland.** Providing that President Muse Bihi honors Somaliland's electoral timeline and cultivates diplomatic solutions with Laascaanood, partnership with Somaliland offers geostrategic promise.

⁵⁴ W Rumbaugh; Feb. 2024, CSIS

6. About the authors:

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