

Houthi Terror and the Global Threat to Freedom of Shipping: The Need for a Multinational Maritime Alliance

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December 25, 2023

Since the Hamas terror attack in the Negev on October 7 and the start of the war in Gaza, there have been escalating attacks by the Houthi terror organization, disrupting navigation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The stated aim of the organization, one of the most prominent Iranian proxies, is to harass and damage ships linked directly or indirectly to Israel, in response to Israel's operations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. However, most of the Houthi attacks so far have damaged ships that have no link to Israel. In view of the centrality of the route through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the Suez Canal – a route taken by 12 percent of global maritime trade in goods, including cargoes of energy (oil, coal, gas, etc.), raw materials, and consumer goods – the Houthi attacks pose a threat to the global economy. An effective response requires a multinational maritime alliance led by the United States and joined by Israel and the pragmatic Sunni states in the region, similar to how the free world dealt with the threat of Somali pirates. The Abraham Accords, alongside the reassignment of US-Israeli military cooperation from the European command (EUCOM) to the Central Command (CENTCOM), enable Israel to be an active and contributing partner in a maritime alliance of this nature.

Since the terror attack by Hamas on October 7 in the western Negev and the start of the Swords of Iron war in Gaza, a growing number of incidents by the Houthi terror organization have disrupted global navigation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The Houthis in Yemen, one of Iran's most important proxies in the Middle East, joined the "axis of resistance" against Israel and its "aggression" in the Gaza Strip and the region, and operate on two parallel channels: the first involves repeated ballistic missile and drone attacks on Israeli territory, particularly Eilat. So far these have been successfully neutralized by Israeli, US, and Saudi air defense systems. This threat, however, should not be underestimated, since no defense system is effective in all cases, and one successful strike could cause significant damage to people and property. The second and currently more significant channel is the

Houthi activity in the maritime realm. The organization has threatened to disrupt ships linked directly or indirectly with Israel, including ships that are partly or fully owned by Israelis, or ships making their way between Israel and Asia. So far, in most cases the Houthis have in fact attacked ships that have no link to Israel or Israeli/Jewish ownership. Therefore, these incidents should be viewed as a revival of marine piracy in the Red Sea, which was ostensibly eradicated in recent years, and as a threat to global trade and the global economy.

Global Trade and the Maritime Realm

Changes in global trade over recent decades, and the centrality of the route from Bab el-Mandeb to the Suez Canal within this system, highlight the threat posed by the Houthi activity to the global economy.

The importance of the maritime realm has increased in recent decades: it has assumed an expanded role in global trade, and in effect the global economy has taken to the seas. Almost 100 percent of Israel's foreign trade (in weight and volume) is transported at sea through its ports. Today's global trade, particularly in the field of liner shipping (container transportation), has morphed from a network of national shipping lines into a web of global and international matrices, unprecedented in their complexity and scope and in the size of the ships engaged. This revolution means that ships today carry cargoes for a range of international destinations, not just to one country.

In the framework of the revolution in maritime trade, the Arabian Sea in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, from Bab el-Mandeb in the south to the Suez Canal in the north, are important routes, with considerable effect on global supply chains. Indeed, it is hard to overstate the importance of these maritime routes for the global economy. Since its construction 150 years ago, the Suez Canal has become the main route for transporting goods between Asia and the countries of Europe and the Mediterranean. An estimated 12 percent of global marine trade traverses the route from Bab el-Mandeb to the Suez Canal, carrying cargoes of energy (oil, coal, gas, etc.), raw materials, and consumer goods. The total number of containers passing through the Suez Canal is equivalent to about 30 percent of the total global container trade, and worth about one trillion dollars annually. Israel is one of many countries in the region whose economy is dependent to a large extent on the safety of maritime trade in the Red Sea and through the Bab el-Mandeb route. In order to protect global trade, international law and its instruments have determined that these routes and others like it throughout the world must be open and safe for everyone, without question.

However, freedom of navigation in the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea has been challenged since the start of the 21st century by piracy incidents launched by various groups. From 2006 to 2010 there was a sharp leap in the number of incidents threatening maritime trade through the Bab el-Mandeb strait by pirate groups from Somalia, who demanded ransom from the owners and operators of hundreds of ships that they boarded in the area of the Arabian Sea and the northwest of the Indian Ocean. An analysis by the World Bank in 2013 estimated the cost to the global economy of Somali piracy at \$18 billion, equal to a rise of one percent in the costs of global trade. In response to this threat, a multilateral task force was set up, led by the United States, to protect shipping routes, and 120 war ships from 20 different fleets were deployed in the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea. These actions have managed to eliminate the Somali threat almost completely. However, in recent years there has once again been a rise in attempts to attack cargo ships on these routes, by countries and by terror organizations, characterized by a growing degree of violence, sophistication, and use of advanced weapons. Since October 7, 2023, the threats to the freedom of navigation have intensified, following piratical activity by Iran and its Houthi proxies.

The Threat from Iran and the Houthis to the Freedom of Navigation

Iran and its proxies have long threatened the freedom of global navigation and have steadily developed the capabilities and means to disrupt the maritime activity of countries around the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf. In the last two months, since the start of the war in Gaza, the Houthi terror army has significantly increased its provocations around the Red Sea. The Houthis comprise a Shi'ite-Zaydi terror organization that has been active in northwest Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula for about two decades. It numbers some 300,000-400,000 active members, and it is a central element of the Iranian "axis of resistance" in the Middle East, whose overall aims are the destruction of Israel, harm to US interests in the region, and undermining of moderate Sunni regimes that cooperate with the United States and Israel. The Houthi terror army demonstrates a wide spectrum of capabilities in the maritime dimension, where it is possible to discern Iranian influence, including attacking ships sailing to and from the Red Sea using USVs (Unmanned Surface Vehicles) and UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles), as well as planting naval mines and firing shore-to-sea missiles.

While Houthi rhetoric is directed against Israel and threatens ships linked to Israel, whether directly or indirectly, Houthi aggression has actually impacted a wide range of countries, and essentially threatens global maritime trade in general. For example, three ships damaged by the Houthis on December 3 had no link to Israeli trade, and were transporting cargoes to or from China. In another incident, the

Houthis took control of a car carrier called *Galaxy Leader* that was transporting automobiles between India and Turkey. The ship is British-owned, operated by a Japanese company, and flies the flag of the Bahamas, and its crew are from a range of nations. This is a clear example of the international nature of commercial ships today, making the identification of the nationality of a specific ship an extremely difficult, if not impossible task. In fact, commercial ships are practically a non-national means of transportation, serving the international community in general for global trade.

It is clear, therefore, that Houthi attempts to attack ships with a connection to Israel are a threat to all global maritime trade between Asia and the Mediterranean, Europe, and even the United States, passing through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the Suez Canal. It is already possible to see the signs of the Houthi threat in the discourse relating to global maritime trade and in the actions of companies operating in this field, some of whom have announced that they will divert their shipping routes and even extend them in response to the threat. In the near future, the physical damage to cargo ships is likely to lead to a further increase in war risk insurance premiums in the shipping market. In the extreme scenario, if large transportation companies decide to avoid crossing the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the Suez Canal and instead sail around Africa to the west, it is possible to predict huge disruptions of global supply chains and significant rises in the costs of international trade. The extra time required by ships choosing the route round Africa instead of the Suez Canal is about two to three weeks, according to the speed of the specific ship. As a result of the delay, countries and companies will have to invest in enlarging their stocks. An event that testifies to the dangers inherent in the Houthi threat is the obstruction of the Suez Canal for six days by the ship *Ever Given* in March 2021, which caused considerable international economic damage by delaying hundreds of ships trying to cross the Suez Canal, while others took the alternative route around Africa.

The challenges to the freedom of navigation and the global economy have intensified following recent statements by the Houthis, in which they threatened to create a de facto maritime blockade by attacking every vessel sailing toward Israeli ports. With this rhetoric the Houthis have significantly expanded the number of ships under threat. International companies will find it hard to stop services to Israeli ports, when even transshipment or announcing a “termination of voyage”¹ in a port outside Israel will make them a legitimate target in the eyes of the Houthis. The escalation of the threats from the Houthis and their

¹ The ability of a cargo ship to unload its cargo in a different port from the one stated in the bill of landing (the transportation contract) for reasons defined in the contract, including war, force majeure, and more.

international implications were brought into greater focus after the attack on the French military vessel (FS *Languedoc* – D653), which intercepted two drones aimed at it about 70 miles northwest of the area controlled by the Houthis. This apparently marks a big step forward in the Houthi threat to global maritime trade, which will demand special attention from the international community in the near future.

Addressing the Houthi Maritime Threat

In view of the global nature of the Iranian and Houthi threat to shipping routes in the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, a coordinated and determined multi-national strategy is required, as was used successfully in the past in the struggle against Somali piracy. A failure of the free world to respond in a clear and resolute manner to the Houthi threats will damage global maritime trade and set a dangerous precedent of succumbing to terror on the seas, thus giving legitimacy to actions by other countries and organizations designed to disrupt the free passage of vessels at other chokepoints based on political discrimination.² Therefore, the required response to Iranian-Houthi aggression is a multi-national marine alliance led by the United States and with the participation of other countries, including pragmatic Sunni countries in the region.

In an encouraging development, on December 19, the United States launched a multinational maritime task force to safeguard ships passing through the shipping lanes in the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea from Iranian-Houthi threats. The initiative, named Operation Prosperity Guardian, was joined by France, the United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Australia, Greece, and Bahrain, among other countries. The task force also includes contributors that have not been named. This is a welcome development that Israel should support.

The Abraham Accords, together with the reassignment of US-Israeli military cooperation from the European Command (EUCOM) to the Central Command (CENTCOM), enable Israel to become an active partner in the new maritime alliance. The Israeli navy has a large variety of vessels, capabilities, and units that can participate in a wide range of task forces, from humanitarian missions, through assistance and the securing of freedom of navigation in threatened areas, to tasks of building situational awareness or the collection of intelligence, to obstruction of maritime terror activity and weapons smuggling. Maritime forces could operate overtly and covertly, using a combination of various fleets in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and other places. All these are of course very relevant

² Chokepoints: between seas/oceans and other geographically restricted sailing routes whose blockage damages free maritime trade.

to tackling the threat from Iran and its proxies. In addition, the security industries of Israel are at the forefront in a range of maritime technologies and can make an important contribution to any alliance.

Implementation of the proposed policy through the advancement of marine diplomacy as a tool for intensifying and expanding the Abraham Accords at a time when they are challenged by the war in Gaza could help Israel turn the Houthi threat into a strategic opportunity. Maritime diplomacy is considered an effective tool for promoting cooperation between companies, thanks to the shared language of seafarers that permits them to bypass existing diplomatic obstacles.