Insight

The Evolution of the Houthi Security Concept After October 7, 2023

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To survive in a hostile environment, the Houthi movement has had to learn and adapt from the start. The Zaydi revivalist youth movement of the early 1990s, the guerrilla force fighting government troops in Saada in 2004, and the semi-state that now rules most of Yemen's population are three very different organizations. The group has changed in what it is, what it does, and how it reads its own interests. These changes have been driven by domestic upheaval and by shocks to its strategic environment: the Houthi seizure of Sanaa in 2014, the Saudi-led campaign to unseat them launched in 2015, and the regional wars that followed Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. This paper sets out a thesis for how the Houthis perceive their own security concept and argues that the period after October 2023 defines a new chapter in it; understanding the Houthi strategic outlook is essential for assessing the group's likely intentions toward Israel in the short to medium term, reducing the risk of strategic surprise, and restoring deterrence following the group's recent attacks on Israel that went unanswered.

How do the Houthis think? Analysts have vexed over this question for over a decade. In practice, they act based on a blend of realpolitik and a radical, anti-Western and antisemitic Zaydi Islamism. Far less has been written about how the group perceives threats and manages risk, or about how its security concept has evolved in the period after October 2023.

Before October 2023, that concept was peninsular. It was built to vanquish and then extort the group's enemies in Yemen's civil war while keeping the United States and Israel at arm's length. Hamas's attack on October 7th 2023 and the ensuing Houthi Red Sea campaign changed the frame, as the group came to see their interests and threats as reaching well beyond the Arabian Peninsula.

The Pre-October 2023 Security Concept: Focused on the Arabian Peninsula

A) Key Targets

October 2023 found the Houthis strong abroad and brittle at home. Their strength rested foremost on having worn down the Saudi-led coalition launched against them eight years earlier. The coalition was spending tens of billions of dollars a year, and absorbing painful reputational damage, to fight the Houthis to a stalemate from 2019 onward. An unofficial truce was in place in 2023, after the official temporary ceasefire lapsed, but the Houthis avoided a final settlement as they judged that time was on

their side. Riyadh and its partners wanted out, and that desire only increased over time, which let the Houthis calibrate their aggression and keep raising the price of an agreement to extract concessions in the two areas where they ran deficits: the economy and diplomacy.

Toward the United States and Israel, the posture was avoidance. The movement whose slogan demands "Death to America" and "Death to Israel" was fighting neither. By 2018 it was striking deep into Saudi Arabia and hitting Abu Dhabi, and by 2021 it was displaying systems it claimed could strike Israel at more than 1,800 kilometers. It is almost certain by that point Sanaa could have hit American and Israeli assets in the region, but it had done so only once when it targeted a U.S. Navy vessel in 2016 and then stopped after the response proved swift and direct. Staying out of those fights was a deliberate choice: the group prioritized coalition targets and was deterred by the pain that tier-one militaries and intelligence services could inflict.

The Houthi position in the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" was correspondingly loose. Weapons, components and expertise flowed from the IRGC and Hezbollah into Yemen, but the Houthi support that flowed to the axis was primarily rhetorical. No joint operations such as simultaneous missile launches against a common foe are reported prior to 2023. Membership in the axis cost little and obliged less.

B) Economic Warfare

i.Defense

The group also proved adept at turning international organizations to its advantage. As it styled itself an organic political-religious movement, sympathetic NGOs cast efforts to suppress it as assaults on free expression. As early as the Saada wars of the 2000s, rights organizations framed the government's campaign against the nascent movement as abuse: Abdulkarim al-Khaiwani, a journalist the Yemeni courts convicted in 2008 of collaborating with the Houthi leadership in Saada, was embraced abroad as a persecuted dissident and given Amnesty International's Special Award for Human Rights Journalism under Threat. He later resurfaced after the 2014 seizure of Sanaa as a member of the Houthis' Revolutionary Committee. Throughout Yemen's civil war, there was a recurring pattern: much of the humanitarian sector blamed the coalition for Yemen's economic collapse, which in practice translated into extreme international pressure on the coalition to avoid any harm to Houthi-held ports. When the coalition came close to taking Hodeidah in 2018, objections from UN agencies and international NGOs helped deny it the political cover to complete the mission and cut off this vital Houthi lifeline.

ii.Offense

Economic warfare ran alongside military pressure. The Houthis worked to weaken the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG) in Yemen and deepen its dependence on the Gulf. The IRG, led first by Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and then by the Presidential Leadership Council, had little revenue beyond Gulf aid, and the Houthis went after what remained. In late 2022 they forced a halt to oil and gas exports by threatening drone strikes on the loading terminals, erasing an estimated $2 to $3 billion in annual revenue and pushing the IRG into fiscal crisis. They also diverted a significant percentage of shipping from IRG ports to capture the customs duties for themselves. The result was permanent fiscal crisis for the IRG and greater reliance on Gulf transfers. The utility of this mechanism for the Houthis was evident when the Aden-based central bank tried in 2024 to force Sanaa-headquartered banks to relocate in

order to curb Houthi control of Yemen's financial system. In response, the Houthis threatened Riyadh, Riyadh leaned on the Presidential Leadership Council, and the measure was reversed.

C) Domestic Failure

What the group's regional success could not do was stabilize its domestic arena, where deteriorating economic conditions and intensifying political and religious repression left the home front fragile. Since 2016 most public sector employees in Houthi-controlled areas have received little or no salary, with the security sector being a notable exception, despite the Houthis collecting substantial revenue from taxes, customs duties, and the war economy. In the summer of 2023, educators across Sanaa and other northern cities staged a rare strike over years of lost wages, and prominent figures in Yemen's non-Houthi (GPC) political elite declared their support for the teachers. Notably, the Houthis waited until 8 October 2023 to intensify their campaign of repression, abducting union leaders and overhauling the personnel of the education ministry. The episode exposed the soft domestic underbelly of a model that could project power outward but not meet basic standards of governance for its people; war abroad could not manufacture legitimacy at home indefinitely.

The Post-October 2023 Global Security Concept

A) Key Targets

The Red Sea campaign that began on 19 October 2023 changed the Houthi calculus. Between late 2023 and mid-2025, the Houthis launched more than 520 attacks, struck at least 176 ships and carried out some 155 strikes on Israeli territory, turning a regional actor into a disruptor of global trade at the Bab al-Mandab chokepoint. By attaching itself to the Gaza war as a member of the axis and interfering with the global economy in order to blockade Eilat port, the movement placed itself at the center of a regional conflict with global implications. The Houthis' newfound positioning ultimately changed its security concept in significant ways.

The Gulf, once seen as the vulnerable prey of the Houthis, became the front to keep quiet. With the American and Israeli fronts active, the doctrine was to avoid a multi-front war and, above all, not to reopen the Saudi one. A calm Gulf preserved the freedom to absorb and answer Western strikes without encirclement. The aim shifted from fighting the Gulf to threatening it in a desperate effort to extract concessions, as the Houthis have demonstrated a newfound sense of urgency to reach an agreement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

It is also possible that in parallel the Houthis came to the conclusion that open-ended war against the Saudi-led coalition was not sustainable indefinitely: it was expensive (salaries, material and payments to the families of the dead and wounded), the war's legitimacy thinned once the Saudi-led air campaign wound down in 2022, and a war against fellow Arabs sat awkwardly with a worldview fixated on the United States and Israel.

Meanwhile, the United States and Israel moved from the periphery to the heart of the concept. The post-October 7th Houthi attacks and the responses to it taught the Houthis that Washington and Jerusalem do not fight like the Gulf coalition. They can strike hard and without telegraphed or linear intentions. In March 2025, the Trump administration abruptly launched Operation Rough Rider and hit more than 1,100 targets in fifty-two days. Israel, for as long as the Houthis continued their attacks, sporadically struck the group's Red Sea ports and critical infrastructure and launched devastating assassination

strikes against the group's senior leadership. The lesson was that Washington and Jerusalem are "wildcards" whose reactions cannot be priced in advance, which is precisely why the Houthis sought to keep the Gulf front quiet.

The group's once-loose tie to the axis has also tightened since October 2023. In coordination with other axis members, the Houthis made a public commitment to keep striking Israel and blockading Eilat until a ceasefire was reached in Gaza. They ultimately became the axis's "last man standing": as other members absorbed painful blows and recalculated, the Houthis pressed on, enduring heavy strikes themselves but pursuing the campaign until that ceasefire took hold. However, this did not make their interests subordinate to the axis's, as their negligible role in Iran's defense during "Lion's Roar" demonstrated. Sanaa remains an independent, self-confident node in the axis, one that prizes the survival of its own regime above all.

B) Economic Warfare

i. Defense

The UN and international NGO presence in Yemen has declined both as a political shield for the Houthi economy and as a major revenue stream. Israeli strikes on the Hodeidah and Ras Issa ports brought no ensuing catastrophe, exposing humanitarian lobbyists as having vastly exaggerated their claims. The same proved true of the Trump administration's designation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, after which the predicted crisis again failed to materialize. The next such UN/INGO warning of impending disaster in Yemen is likely to be met with the skepticism it warrants. At the same time, a convergence of diminished funding, Houthi disruption of aid delivery, and the detention of dozens of aid workers has driven major organizations such as the World Food Programme to wind down operations in the north. These organizations, which once helped ensure the survival of the Houthi economy, are far less able to do so today.

ii. Offense

The Red Sea terminals that had anchored the group's revenue and its leverage over the IRG until 2023 are now fixed, targetable assets that Israel and the United States can hit at will. The response has been a sharpened emphasis on domestic production. In a May 2026 speech, the group's leader, Abdelmalek al-Houthi, claimed that Yemen had once produced its own essentials before those industries were decimated by imports. He decried "the very strange trend of businessmen to import everything, down to the smallest details, to a degree that is astonishing." For an economy wracked by dysfunction, corruption and sanctions, this aim of self-sufficiency, in everything from produce to flip-flops to ovens, appears highly likely to fail. Yet the Houthis are already recasting the higher costs that consumers will bear as the price of boycotting foreign goods for the sake of "liberation."

C) Domestic Solidarity?

On the home front, no recent polling offers any indication of trends in public support for the Houthi regime. The Houthis seem to be betting on a combination of indoctrination in the group's ideology of absolute loyalty to Abdelmalek al-Houthi, repression of those who speak out or refuse to fall in line, and efforts to rally the public around causes seen as popular in Yemen, such as Palestine and self-sufficiency. Yet given the economic decline, corruption, and the other grievances that typically erode popular support, it seems unlikely that the group has significantly enhanced its standing with the Yemeni public.

Friction with external enemies may help justify the regime for a time, but there is no guarantee that continuously dragging Yemen into conflicts will maintain that same effect indefinitely. The Houthis have no real solution to their domestic dilemma, only a balancing act they must continually manage: keeping the population docile while placing their ideological project above the public interest. The domestic arena remains the group's weak underbelly, even if no clear, unified opposition has yet emerged.

Conclusion

Beyond the conclusions about how the Houthi security concept has evolved (and in some cases inverted) in response to regional developments, it is worth considering what this indicates for the future. The Houthis are unlikely to abandon their now-broader view of threats and opportunities for a narrower one. Even so, their security concept will keep evolving as events unfold and Israel should maintain a consistent focus on the group's intentions (in addition to capabilities) as one of several methods to mitigate the risk of a strategic surprise.

Five key conclusions follow:

1. **Trouble at home.** The home front remains the Houthis' enduring weakness and will likely stay so for the foreseeable future. They will manage it as best they can through repression and mobilization rather than through the legitimacy that effective governance would earn.
2. **The movement's structure is a double-edged sword.** Built on fluid, constantly evolving dynamics and highly personalized roles, the movement can adapt quickly to a changing environment. But that same absence of rigid structure could leave it vulnerable to sudden fragmentation or collapse under the extreme pressure of multiple parallel crises.
3. **Calm with Saudi Arabia depends on the United States.** The quiet on the Houthi–Saudi front rests on U.S. deterrence, and to a lesser extent Israeli deterrence, not on Houthi restraint. Should U.S. and Israeli regional engagement decline, that deterrence could weaken, forcing Riyadh to make a choice between renewed conflict and an accommodation on Houthi terms.
4. **Reported reductions in UN and INGO engagement are a positive development, but must be verified**. Aid activity in Yemen has likely inflicted more harm than it has prevented, given its indirect role in propping up the Houthi economy. Any claim by UN agencies or NGOs, whether about winding down operations or about imminent humanitarian catastrophe, should be verified independently. UN/INGOs have a track record of limited transparency and exaggerated warnings that cast serious doubt on the veracity of their claims.
5. **Houthi reliance on Oman is a bottleneck.** Oman is the Houthis' main channel for de-escalation in moments of vulnerability. If the Houthi–Omani nexus is disrupted, the group loses its primary means of exiting confrontations on favorable terms.

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