

REASONS FOR THE HOUTHI ATTACKS AGAINST ISRAEL

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Abstract

The leader of the Houthi movement Ansar Allah intervened in the latest Israeli-Palestinian conflict on October 7, 2023, on the side of Palestine, which provoked political and military tensions with Israel, as well as in the Red Sea waters with attacks on commercial and military ships, the property of Western powers or Israeli economic entities. These events have inherently widened the Middle East conflict and destabilized the region. The Ansar Allah attacks have prompted the US and UK to launch sporadic airstrikes on Houthi-controlled Yemeni targets. The signing of an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire ended attacks on Israeli targets and vessels in the Red Sea for a period of time.

Keywords: Houthis, attack, merchant ships, Red Sea, ceasefire

JEL: Y80

Introduction

The unification of the two Yemeni states in the early 1990s did not last long. The Sunni community's desire to dominate the Shiite Houthis provoked a national resistance in North Yemen against the official government. In 2014, political tensions between Yemenis and Houthis escalated into a civil war, resulting in the political and military control of northern and western Yemen and the capital, Sanaa, by the Houthi movement Ansar Allah. These events gave the Zaydi movement and its leader, Abdul Malek al-Houthi, the ability to make independent decisions in domestic and foreign policy.

In this sense, the Houthis in Yemen made an independent decision to provide political and military support to Palestinian resistance movements in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on October 7, 2023. Their support is expressed in attacks on Israeli targets and vessels in the Red Sea, which also provoked international reactions against the Houthis' actions.

The main objective of the study is to analyze the reasons why the Houthi movement attacks Israeli targets and merchant ships in the Red Sea, as well as the reactions of the international community in their efforts to limit the Houthis' military capabilities.

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The thesis on which the scientific article is based is that the basis of the Houthis' attacks on targets on Israeli soil and commercial vessels in the Red Sea is the result of the emergence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on October 7, 2023.

The methodological basis for developing the main questions is the general methodology of knowledge. To create the necessary consistency, depth and clarity of the presentation in this report, the systematic methodological approach was mainly used, which requires the presentation of individual issues to be done as a system, by finding the system-forming factors.

Why are Yemen's Houthis interfering in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

The attack by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad on October 7, 2023, against Israeli targets and taking Jewish citizens hostage, only deepened the Middle East crisis. The attack by Palestinian militants provoked an angry reaction from the government of Benjamin Netanyahu, who issued an order to launch a military offensive in the Gaza Strip. With the start of the Israeli military operation in Gaza, in solidarity with Palestine, in the second half of October 2023, the Houthis launched rockets against Israel (earlier in the same month, Hezbollah in Lebanon). According to the Houthi military spokesman, Yahya Sari, three attacks with ballistic missiles and drones were carried out against Israel. The aim of these attacks is to provide assistance to the Palestinians until the Israeli aggression ceases. The Houthi military spokesman, in a media statement, blamed Israel for the instability in the Middle East, saying that „the circle of conflicts in the region is widening due to its ongoing crimes” (Dahan, 2024).

Sporadic rocket attacks on Israel continued into November, but expanded to include military operations to seize naval and merchant ships in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea. On November 19, 2023, Yemeni rebels managed to seize the British-owned cargo ship “Galaxy Leader”, which was owned by a Jewish billionaire and run by Japan. To this end, the Houthis use drones, missiles and small boats to carry out the task, while the crew of the vessel remains captive to the Houthi movement, including two Bulgarian citizens – the ship's captain and his assistant. This act blocks the southern point of the Red Sea, one of the world's most important waterways for international trade. Threats to shipping in the Red Sea are forcing merchant ships to use alternative ports in Africa, which increases transportation costs and the resulting consequences of delayed deliveries and an increase in the value of transported goods. In this context, a representative of Ansar Allah stated that attacks on Israel and merchant ships in the Red Sea owned by Western citizens or Jews will continue until the end of the armed clashes, in a sign of support for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), the first case of a vessel incident in the Red Sea was recorded in August 2023, which actually provoked tension and a demand for an adequate response (Acled, 2025).

This opinion is shared by Brian Carter, head of research for the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, who defines the Houthi movement as “a strategic threat with global implications for the United States and its allies”. The emergence of this threat provoked the United States to take measures to limit the capabilities of the Houthi movement (Carter, 2024).

In this context, on December 18, 2023, the United States and a coalition of over 20 countries launched Operation Prosperity Guardian, with the ultimate goal of protecting international shipping. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin says his mission is to “jointly address security challenges in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, with the goal of ensuring freedom of navigation for all parties and strengthening regional security and prosperity”. The military attack by Western powers has encouraged Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. This act sends a clear signal that the Houthi movement will not bow to Western powers, especially the US and Israel. An argument for such a claim is the fact that the military formations of the Houthi movement continue to attack merchant ships and fire missiles at the territory of the state of Israel, despite the coordinated actions of the Western world and the tacit consent of some Arab countries, including the official government in Yemen.

The resistance of the Ansar Allah military formations forced the United States, Canada, Australia, Great Britain, Bahrain, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore to issue a joint statement in early 2024 warning the Houthis to cease attacking commercial vessels or face the use of military force. In response to the threats, the next day the Houthis launched a drone near merchant ships and those of the US Navy.

The Houthis’ military aggression provoked the international community to take drastic decisions. On January 10, 2024, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2722, which defined the Houthis as a threat to maritime navigation in the Red Sea. The texts of the resolution condemn the attacks by the Houthis on the merchant ship “Galaxy Leader” and the kidnapping of the crew, as well as on all vessels passing through the southern point of the Red Sea (Gulf of Aden and Bab al-Mandeb Strait); the immediate cessation of all attacks on ships; the immediate release of the captain of the “Galaxy Leader” and his crew; the right of Member States (of the International Maritime Organization) to protect their ships from attack, in accordance with international law; creating conditions to improve the safety and secure transit of merchant ships of all States in the Red Sea, by building the capacity of the Yemeni Coast Guard; effective implementation of the arms embargo on the Houthis, in accordance with Resolutions 2216 (2015) and 2624 (2022).

On January 11, 2024, based on a resolution adopted by the UN Security Council, the US and the UK, with political and logistical support from other countries,

launched military strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen. Operation Poseidon Archer has carried out more than 150 precision-guided munitions strikes on 60 targets, including radars, missile and drone launch sites, and weapons depots in Yemen. The naval operation in the Red Sea, off the coast of Somalia, resulted in the seizure of a sailboat transporting Iranian weapons for the Houthis (Blanchard, 2024; Wilson Center, 2024).

Earlier this year, airstrikes against Houthi targets sparked international condemnation. The Biden administration said the strikes were “defensive” and aimed at limiting the Houthi movement’s influence in Yemen while minimizing damage.

British Prime Minister Rushdie Sunak has argued for the reasons why the country used military force against the Houthi movement, saying the country acted “in self-defense” in view of Houthi attacks on Royal Navy ships “in accordance with the UN Charter and to uphold freedom of navigation”. In this regard, the head of the British government proposes four priorities for the Red Sea – diplomatic efforts to support de-escalation; imposing an arms embargo on the Houthis; introducing new sanctions; continuing to provide aid to Yemen and supporting a political solution to the conflict. Both sides emphasize that their goal “remains de-escalation of tensions and restoration of stability in the Red Sea” (House of Commons Library, 2025, pp. 7-8).

UN Assistant Secretary-General Khaled Kyari has supported the use of military force against the Houthi movement to achieve freedom of navigation. In defense of this position, the US government has also said that linking the Houthis’ actions to the conflict in Gaza is “false” and that such statements “empower the Houthis and legitimize their actions” (House of Commons Library, 2025, pp. 26-27).

On January 12, the spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General described Houthi attacks on merchant ships as “unacceptable” and must stop, as mandated by Resolution 2722 (2024). At the same time, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on all member states to protect their ships from attacks in accordance with international law, as stated in the resolution, without allowing further escalation of tensions threatening maritime navigation in the Red Sea and widening regional tensions in the Middle East. In this context is the statement of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grünberg.

In response to the Houthis’ aggressive actions, the United States is imposing sanctions on members of the Houthi movement, legal entities, ships, and companies using Iranian financial support. These legal consequences are expanded to cover a wider range of individuals and entities, including the Minister of Defense, Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi, Mohammed Ahmad al-Talibi – Deputy Minister of Defense and Director of the Procurement Department, the Commander of the Houthi Naval Forces, Mohammed Fadl Abd al-Nabi, and the Head of the Naval

College, Mohammed Ali al-Qadari (Jersey Financial Services Commission). The EU and Britain join the policy of imposing political and economic sanctions with the aim of pressuring the Houthis, releasing hostages, and normalizing free navigation in the Red Sea.

In early 2024, US President Joe Biden designated the Houthis as a global terrorist group, although the current administration removed the “Foreign Terrorist Organization” designation imposed by Donald Trump’s first-term administration in January 2021. The reaction of the Zaydi militants was also not long in coming, announcing in their statements that the attacks will continue until the Israeli army’s military aggression against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip stops (House of Commons Library, 2025, pp. 43-44, 49-52).

The US and UK attacks on January 11, 2024, have sparked a negative international reaction from parts of the Arab world. Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud called for restraint and for countries to “avoid escalation”. Saudi authorities fear a possible failure of negotiations in Yemen for a peaceful settlement of the disputed issues and encouraging the Houthis to engage in prolonged military action. Qatar’s position on the Red Sea crisis is clear – the government opposes military attacks against the Houthi movement. They believe that the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on October 7, 2023, will end attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea. This position is joined by China and Russia. According to the Chinese government, US military actions are undermining political negotiations in Yemen and fueling regional tensions, including between Saudi Arabia and Iran. China seeks to maintain good diplomatic and political relations with both countries for the sake of its economic interests.

At the same time, the Russian and Chinese governments abstained from voting on the UN Security Council resolution adopted in January 2024 to take action against the Houthi movement (House of Commons Library, 2025, pp. 12-13, 24-25). Seen in this way, Russian and Chinese foreign policies enter into clear dissonance with their positions. On the one hand, they categorically state that they do not approve of the Anglo-Saxon military policy against the Houthis, but at the same time, with their actions in the Security Council, they give the green light to their competitors by abstaining from voting on the resolution, which in practice means that it was adopted by the permanent and non-permanent members of the UN Security Council. In this line of thought, the question arises, Why do Moscow and Beijing maintain such a position? The answer should perhaps be sought in the image of categorical support for the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, which could have a negative connotation in international relations and exacerbate the political confrontation with the collective West. On the other hand, Russian and Chinese merchant ships also pass through the conflict point in the Red Sea, although their vessels are not subject to attacks by the Houthi movement. At the same time,

they support the Houthis in view of oil supplies from Iran to China, and Russia is interested in Houthi mercenaries to wage military operations against Ukraine, as well as maintaining strategic relations with Iran in economic and military terms after the imposition of a series of economic sanctions by Western countries and their allies after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict.

In June 2024, a G7 leaders meeting in Italy condemned the Houthi attacks. Leaders are uniting to support the US-led and European-led efforts to protect shipping, through the ongoing US-UK naval operations Prosperity Guardian and the EU Aspides. These naval actions play a vital role in protecting critical sea lanes that are essential for global trade. The ongoing Houthi attacks in the Red Sea risk destabilizing the region, disrupting freedom of navigation and trade flows, and jeopardizing the UN-led peace roadmap for Yemen. In this context, the leaders of the meeting called on the Houthis to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law and to cease their attacks in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and surrounding waters (House of Commons Library, 2025, pp. 29-30).

According to research by the House of Commons Library, from October 2023 to the end of 2024, the Houthis launched over 200 missiles and 170 drones against Israel, with separate attacks targeting the Israeli capital Tel Aviv and the southern port of Eilat. Almost all of the missile and drone attacks were intercepted by the Israeli military, including the US and French navies, suggesting long-range hits on Israeli targets with minimal casualties and damage – a school and playground in Tel Aviv, as well as Ben Gurion International Airport.

At the same time, Israel is also carrying out strikes on Yemen in response to attacks by the Houthi movement on fuel depots, energy infrastructure, facilities in the ports of Hodeidah and Ras Issa, as well as the international airport in Sana'a. In early 2025, sporadic Israeli strikes on ports and the Hezaz power plant continued. The Houthis responded quickly, launching a drone attack on Israel. In support of Israel, the United States also launched airstrikes on Houthi targets in Yemen. In addition to military support for the Israeli government, the US and Britain define Israeli attacks as “defensive” with the right to defend themselves against hostile actions by the Houthi movement.

Israeli attacks on the ports of Hodeidah and Ras Issa provoked a critical reaction from the UN, arguing that a large part of food and fuel supplies to Yemen pass through these ports, as well as the reduction in customs revenue.

For their part, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Israel Katz have stated that Israel is ready to take similar military action against the Houthis as it did against Hezbollah and Hamas in 2024. The Defense Minister is even more categorical, saying that “just as we took care of Sinwar in Gaza, Haniyeh in Tehran, and Nasrallah in Beirut, we will deal with the heads of the Houthis in Sana'a or anywhere in Yemen” (House of Commons Library, 2025, pp. 17-20).

With the signing of an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire agreement on January 18, 2025, the Houthis declared an end to attacks on Israeli targets and vessels in the Red Sea. Just three days later, the crew of the Galaxy Leader, consisting of twenty-five sailors, citizens of Bulgaria, Mexico, the Philippines, Romania, and Ukraine, was released. This event coincided with the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Ansar Allah's promise to cease attacks on ships in the Red Sea.

Viewed in the Bulgarian political context, the two sailors – Lyubomir Chanev – captain of the ship "Galaxy Leader" and Danail Veselinov – senior assistant were released together with the rest of the 23-member crew on board. The sea crew was held captive by the Houthis for 14 (fourteen) months. After their release, they were transported to Oman and from there by the government plane of the Republic of Bulgaria were transported to Sofia. Information has been published in the Bulgarian information space about how Bulgarian politicians spoke extremely fondly of themselves and about the exceptional contribution of Bulgarian diplomacy to their release. Moreover, MEP Elena Yoncheva thanked her chairman of the DPS-New Beginning Delyan Peevski, as well as the chairman of GERB Boyko Borisov and the former acting Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria Dimitar Glavchev, and the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria, Georg Georgiev, expressed his gratitude to international partners and the Sultanate of Oman for the efforts made to release the Bulgarian sailors, while the captain and his assistant thank the Bulgarian authorities.

But if an objective and in-depth analysis of what is happening is made, it will be noticed that despite the attempts of the international community, and in particular of the acting Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria Dimitar Glavchev and MEP Elena Yoncheva (who visited Yemen and met with representatives of Ansar Allah and our compatriots in the second half of September 2024), made no significant progress in freeing the hostages. On the spot, it was established that although the Bulgarian sailors are hostages, the Houthis are treating them well and are not deprived of food. Despite the efforts to free the Bulgarian sailors by Elena Yoncheva, it is clear that they will not be released until the Israeli army ceases military operations against the Palestinians in Gaza. After the Bulgarian sailors returned to their homeland, they confirmed the good attitude of the Houthis towards them and that their liberation coincided with the achievement of peace between Jews and Palestinians (pik.bg, 2025). In this sense, one cannot speak of Bulgarian diplomatic success after waiting for international events to occur, such as the achievement of an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire.

At the same time, the Houthis have warned that they are ready to resume military action if the fragile ceasefire in Gaza fails or if the US and British military continue to strike additional targets in Houthi-controlled parts of Yemen. In a televised speech on January 20, 2025, Ansar Allah leader Abdul Malik al-

Houthi warned that attacks on commercial vessels would resume (Raydan and Nadimi, 2025).

In early March 2025, the situation in the Middle East escalated with renewed force. On March 2, Israel blocked the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and access to clean drinking water. Five days later, Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi issued an ultimatum, setting a four-day deadline for Israel to provide a humanitarian corridor. Houthis warn that if their demands are not met, attacks on Israeli-linked merchant ships passing through the Red Sea will resume. On March 11, the organization's spokesman, Yahya Sari, announced the resumption of Houthis' military operations in the Red and Arabian Seas, as well as in Bab al-Mandeb, which coincided with the designation of the Houthi movement Ansar Allah as a "Foreign Terrorist Organization" by the Donald Trump administration, shortly before the announced ultimatum. In response to threats from the Houthis to resume attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea, the United States launched airstrikes on the Yemeni capital Sanaa and the port of Hodeidah, with the aim of physically destroying Ansar Allah leaders. At the same time, the Houthis threatened retaliation by attacking the U.S. Navy in the Red Sea. The US government's reaction to the damage inflicted on an American warship has provoked the anger of Donald Trump, who accuses Iran of encouraging the aggressive behavior of the Yemeni Houthis, to which Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi responded by posting on the X platform "Stop supporting Israeli genocide and terrorism", as well as stop killing Yemenis (Salhani, 2025).

In parallel with the US attacks on Iran, as well as the US president's threats of consequences against the Iranian regime for subsequent attacks by the Houthis on an American warship, information is being published in Arab media and social networks about mass anti-American protests in Sana'a. The political situation in Israel is also tense. Mass demonstrations are taking place in Tel Aviv against the Israeli government and its military policy towards the Palestinians, as well as the failure to free the remaining Israeli hostages. The military-political situation in the Middle East has worsened after the Israeli army attacked Deraa in southern Syria. The next day, Benjamin Netanyahu decided to launch a ground military operation in the Gaza Strip, effectively breaking the ceasefire. The Israeli Prime Minister also accused Hamas of refusing to release the remaining 60 hostages (Al Jazeera, 2025a).

After resuming the military operation in the Gaza Strip, the Yemeni Houthis attacked Israel's Ben Gurion Airport with a hypersonic Palestine-2 missile in response to the Israeli government's violation of the ceasefire, continuing sporadic attacks on Israeli targets and ships in the Red Sea (Al Jazeera, 2025b).

In late March 2025, Arab media reported a new series of attacks on Gaza, while airstrikes were also carried out on southern Yemen, which met with negative international response to Israeli actions. Against this background,

Benjamin Netanyahu proposed a ceasefire that included the departure of Hamas leaders from the Gaza Strip and their disarmament. Despite criticism from Israeli society that nothing is being done to release the remaining Israeli hostages, the Israeli Prime Minister's statement during a cabinet meeting said that "We are negotiating under fire... We are seeing cracks starting to appear", "Military pressure is working", "The combination of military and diplomatic pressure is the only thing that brought the hostages back". De facto, with these statements, the Israeli government emphasizes its success against Hamas by using the military instrument to exert pressure and the lack of political will for a lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An argument for such a claim is Benjamin Netanyahu's admission that "Israel is working on a plan proposed by US President Donald Trump to relocate Gaza residents to other countries" (Al Arabiya news, 2025). In this sense, the thesis of the author of the book "The Middle East and Bulgaria" comes to a well-founded conclusion that the almost eight-decade delay in the creation of an independent Palestine aims only to use the appropriate moment for the actual implementation of the annexation of all Palestinian lands (Kamenov, 2025) as happened with the entire territory of the Golan Heights, which provoked outrage both from the new leader of the Syrian Arab Republic, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and from the Arab-Muslim world at Israel's military aggression.

Conclusion

The new conflict between Israel and the Yemeni Houthis is a reaction to the last Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which continues to this day. At the heart of the armed conflict between Israel and Ansar al-Allah is Palestine. Israel's actions on the military fronts and the support it receives from American governments only deepen the destabilization of the Middle East region. Benjamin Netanyahu's clear intentions regarding the Gaza Strip and the refusal of neighboring Arab countries to accept the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip will become a catalyst for a new wave of violence in the future and the expansion of anti-Jewish sentiment among Arab and Muslim countries.

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