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International Security Report

Iran's Intervention in Yemen

2024

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May 2024

THE GLOBAL POLICY HORIZONS LAB

Empowering Evidence-Based Solutions

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Note from the Lead Author, Samantha Ramay

This International Security Report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Iran's involvement in the conflict in Yemen, as well as the impact on international stakeholders. Through rigorous research and analysis, we endeavor to shed light on key trends, challenges, and opportunities in the realm of conflict and security as well as broader policy implications.

We hope that this report will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, scholars, practitioners, and all those interested in understanding and addressing the complexities of contemporary conflicts.

We express our deepest gratitude to our donor, the Don Maland Scholarship Fund, for their invaluable and generous support for this research and publication.

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About the Author

Samantha Ramay is an undergraduate student in history at Webster University in St. Louis, USA. In the Lab, she is researching and accessing policy scenarios concerning attacks on trade in the Red Sea as well as Iran's conflictual relations with Israel. She is also researching the effects of populism on democracy and populist leaders' contributions to democratic backsliding.

About the Global Policy Horizons Research Lab

Webster University's Global Policy Horizons Lab is a policy-focused research entity where students, Lab researchers, affiliated faculty, as well as members of the policy community from across disciplines, can explore national and global security issues, generate original research, as well as produce peer-reviewed policy papers and commentaries. The Lab pursues innovative research focusing on unconventional threats, identity and security, role of technology in security, economic security, as well environmental and food security. The goal of the Lab is to become a knowledge hub that informs national governments and other members of the global policy community on contemporary and future security challenges.

The current Director of the Lab is Professor Dani Belo, PhD.

Executive Summary

As a result of the October 7th, 2023 Hamas attacks in Israel and the ongoing response from Israel in Gaza, the Houthis, a rebel group in the Republic of Yemen, have entered the conflict in ideological solidarity with Palestine.[1] After firing an unknown number of drones and missiles toward Israel throughout October and November, on November 19, the Houthis seized an Israeli-owned shipping vessel in the Red Sea.[2] Since then, extending into 2024, they have attacked more ships passing through the trade route, now extending beyond Israeli-owned vessels, with drones, missiles, and speed boats.[3] [4] These attacks have threatened international trade and have prompted the United States to form Operation Prosperity Guardian, an international military coalition aimed at protecting ships traveling the Red Sea.[5] The Houthis are part of Iran's proxy system, allied ideologically and supported militarily.[6] Saudi Arabia supports the internationally recognized government of Yemen, and the conflict for power between the Houthis and the Yemeni government is indicative of the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran that has developed since 2015.[7] Yemen is currently experiencing the world's worst humanitarian disaster.[8] With tensions high in the region due to the Israel-Palestine conflict and increasing animosity between Israel and Iran, the Red Sea attacks are a possible catalyst for a bigger and more devastating regional conflict.

Background

In 1990, the Republic of Yemen was founded after the former Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen unified. Four years later, civil war broke out after North-South contentions could not be alleviated and today the country continues to struggle along the geographical divide.[9] In 2014, the Houthi rebel group emerged, perceiving their needs were not being addressed by the National Dialogue Conference held to draft a constitution, and took the capital, Sanaa.[10] Fighting between the Iran-backed Houthi rebels and the Saudi-backed, internationally recognized Yemeni government continued until largely subsiding in 2023. Then, when Hamas attacked Israel, the Houthis officially announced their entry into the war on October 31, 2023, in solidarity with Palestine.[11] The conflict has been indicative of both the enmity between Iran and Israel and the greater regional Sunni and Shia Islamic divide.

Primary Stakeholders

Actor	Impact	Effect
Republic of Yemen	Negative	(-) There are credible reports of human rights abuses and attacks on civil liberties. [12] (-) The government is unable to provide basic services to citizens, including access to reliable food and safe water sources, healthcare, and education. [13]
Ansarallah (the Houthis)	Negative	(-) Beginning on November 19, 2023, the Houthis have launched more than forty attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea, causing damage to thirty-four and resulting in the sinking of the cargo ship the *Rubymar*. (-) The Houthi seizing of Sanaa in 2015 and the resulting war has led to the deaths of over 160,000 and more than four million Yemenis being internally displaced. [14] (-) There are credible reports of human rights abuses and attacks on civil liberties. [15]
Islamic Republic of Iran	Negative	(-) The Quds/Qods Force branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps provides the Houthis with arms, including ballistic missiles and drones (as well as suspected training and intelligence), as part of the Iranian "Axis of Resistance." [16] (-) Conducted the April 14th attack of ballistic missiles, drones, and cruise missiles on Israel, Iran's first direct attack on Israel. [17]
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	Positive	(+) Provided the internationally recognized Yemeni government with 150-200,000 military and paramilitary fighters. as well as military equipment after the defection of 70% of forces to the Houthi opposition. [18] (+) Has been attempting a peace deal with Houthi officials since April of 2022 through a UN truce. [19]

Actor	Impact	Effect
The United States of America	Mixed	(+) Behind the formation of Operation Prosperity Guardian, an international military coalition pushing back against Houthi attacks on shipping vessels in the Red Sea. (+) Provided more than $630 million in humanitarian assistance to Yemen since 2020, including emergency food assistance and medical treatment. [20] (-) The US military presence in the region and allyship with Israel prompts tension with Iran and proxies. [21] [22]

Secondary Stakeholders

Actor	Impact	Effect
Operation Prosperity Guardian	Positive	*Members: United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain* (+) Conducting strikes with aircraft on Houthi targets, including storage facilities, missile systems, and defense systems, to disrupt attacks on vessels and protect international trade. [23]
State of Israel	Negative	(-) Continued retaliatory strikes on Gaza in response to Hamas attacks[24] (-) Conducted the recent retaliatory missile and drone strike on Iran despite risk of conflict escalation. [25]
Palestinian Territories	Negative	(-) Israel's retaliatory strikes on Gaza after the October 7th, 2023 Hamas attacks have resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Palestinians, with the Houthis responding by attacking shipping vessels in the Red Sea as an act of Arab and Islamic solidarity. [26] [27]
European Union	Positive	(+) Launched maritime mission to defend ships in the Red Sea from Houthi attacks, aiding US and British forces while not directly participating in strikes. [28]

Risk Assessment Indicators

Extremely High Risk	High Risk	Medium Risk	Low Risk

History of Armed Conflict **Level: Extremely High Risk** **Trend: Declining**

Destabilizing Factors:

Widespread Displacement: Around 14% of Yemen's population, more than 4.5 million people, are internally displaced as a result of conflict, the majority of this population having been displaced multiple times. Yemen is among the six largest internal displacements in the world.[29]

Humanitarian Crisis: The Houthi emergence in Yemen resulted in a decline in infrastructure and a lack of public health services. A weakened economy has resulted in widespread poverty. 17 million people in Yemen are food insecure, with two-thirds of the population needing humanitarian assistance. Economic and institutional collapse related to the conflict point to a risk of famine and outbreak of preventable disease.[30]

Assessment:

Though the fighting between the Houthi rebels and the Saudi-backed Yemeni government largely subsided in 2023 (thanks to a 2022 UN-brokered cease-fire resulting in lowered frequency of violence from both sides), the October 7th, 2023 attacks and Israel's response prompted the Houthis to act in symbolic solidarity with Palestine.[31] The move to attack ships in the Red Sea, diverting attention from an already fraught landscape where the Yemeni people are suffering a humanitarian crisis, is an indication of the Houthis strong anti-Israel ideological alignment with Iran.[32]

Governance and Political Instability **Level: High Risk** **Trend: Declining**

Destabilizing Factors:

Political Vacuum: Yemen's government is classified as "in transition" due to its presidential seat being vacant and its constitution still being drafted. Currently, a seven-member presidential council is responsible for Yemen's political representation and security. The process of drafting a new constitution was interrupted by the current conflict that began on October 7th, 2023.[33]

Repression of Political Opponents and Human Rights Abuses: The Houthis control the majority of former state institutions in northern Yemen, resulting in the misuse of former anticorruption authorities to rid of political dissent and opponents. This limits also the government's capability to investigate abuses. Credible reports of human rights abuses have been reported at the hands of all parties, including arbitrary killings, torture, restriction of expression and assembly, and inhibiting participation in free and fair elections.[34]

Factors Inhibiting Political Development: Internal sectarian and tribal conflict has prevented the government from exercising authority.[35] The Southern Transitional Council has halted

governmental progress in renewing calls for an independent southern Yemeni state.[36] Additionally, the Israel-Palestine conflict has shifted the Houthis' attention to symbolic actions in the Red Sea attacks rather than focusing on establishing a national government.[37]

Assessment:

The already fraught governmental instability in Yemen has been made even more vulnerable in light of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The Houthis have disregarded peace talks in favor of the Red Sea attacks in solidarity with Palestine.[38] Advancements in the writing of a constitution and filling the presidential void will occur in the absence of conflict and are not likely to happen soon (or at all without intervention).

Militarization **Level: Extremely High Risk** **Trend: Declining**

Destabilizing Factors:

Yemen's Saudi-Backed Military Capability: Yemen's ROYG (Republic of Yemen Government) forces consist of roughly 300,000 fighters, containing an estimated 150-200,000 Saudi Arabian military and paramilitary fighters. Yemen has also received limited equipment donations from Saudi Arabia. An estimated 70% of Yemen's military and security forces defected between 2011 and 2015 to Houthi opposition. Much of Yemen's primarily Soviet-era military equipment was lost in the conflict.[39]

Houthis Iran-Backed Military Capability: The Houthis are part of the IRGC's extensive use of proxy forces, which the IRGC arms and trains. The group has received ballistic missiles and drones from the IRGC as well as military and political support.[40] [41] Houthis arms include UAVs, missile units and naval forces.[42] Iran has also assisted the Houthis in building factories to manufacture drones. It's unclear how much direct control Iran has over Houthi command.[43]

Regional Nuclear Capabilities: The conflict between Israel and Iran has led to a quiet nuclear arms race. Israel currently maintains a policy of "nuclear ambiguity," refraining from admissions that they are nuclear-capable. [44] Israel considers the potential of Iran possessing nuclear weapons to be an existential threat and has approached the Iranian nuclear program as a priority security issue.[45]

Assessment:

The influx of weaponry, manpower, and support from Saudi Arabia and Iran is indicative of the proxy conflict between the two countries and escalates the conflict within Yemen. The greater threat of the use of nuclear capabilities in the case of Israel is a relevant consideration of a worst-case scenario as attacks have been exchanged between Israel and Iran, indications of a greater risk of larger conflict.[46] Further aggression from Iranian-backed proxies may increase risk of Israeli use of nuclear weapons, the potential use of which then greatly accelerating the regional conflict and likely expanding the conflict to other proxies and allies internationally.

Population Heterogeneity **Level: Medium Risk** **Trend: Stable** →

Ethnic Diversity: The population of Yemen is predominantly Arab and also contains Afro-Arab, South Asian, and European minorities.

Destabilizing Factors:

Religious Diversity: Virtually all Yemeni citizens are Muslim (99.1%) but are divided among Sunni and Shia (65% Sunni and 35% Shia).[47]

Assessment:

While ethnic and religious divides are not at the heart of conflict within Yemen, the religious divide between the Sunni and Shia sects represents the greater regional ideological struggle as the Houthis are from the Shia minority, also known as the Zaidis.[48]

Demographic Stress **Level: High Risk** **Trend: Declining** ↓

Population: The population of Yemen is roughly 31,565,602 people.

Population Density: The population is 39.8% urban, the majority in rural areas with little infrastructure.[49]

Destabilizing Factors:

Resource-Based Overpopulation: There is not enough life-sustaining resources in Yemen to fully support the entire population. The widespread food scarcity is in part due to Yemen being nearly dependent on imported food, the imports fluctuating with shipping issues (interruptions being felt acutely as of late considering the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea).[50] Political instability, poverty, and high prices additionally contribute to food scarcity and insecurity.[51] Yemen is also in a water scarcity crisis prompted by population growth and depleting groundwater sources.[52]

Youth Bulge: Yemen is experiencing rapid population growth, with 39% of the population falling under the age of fourteen.[53] As a result of widespread hunger and the high youth population, 39.9% of children under the age of five are underweight.[54] As late as 2022, all parties involved in the conflict in Yemen were implicated in child soldier recruitment and use.[55]

Assessment:

Population growth coupled with a lack of resources will continue the self-fueling cycle of political instability and humanitarian crises. While child soldier recruitment was agreed upon to end in 2022 with the Houthis signing an agreement with the UN, Yemeni youth are now an even more vulnerable population considering the increased risk of famine with shipping interruptions and increased Houthi mobilization in light of the Israel-Palestine conflict.[56] The Houthis control Sanaa and the northwest regions of Yemen, where the majority of the Yemeni population resides.[57]

Economic Performance **Level: Extremely High Risk** **Trend: Declining**

Destabilizing Factors:

Attacks on International Trade: The Houthis have attacked ships in the Red Sea, one of the world's lifeline maritime trade routes.[58] The Houthis influence the Bab el Mandeb Strait, the strait linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and one of the most active shipping lanes.[59] Before the attacks, about 15% of global maritime trade would go through the Red Sea. As of January 19th, almost 25% of global shipping was diverted from the Red Sea and around Africa.

Longer Travel and Higher Cost: The attacks have resulted in higher shipping costs and therefore higher prices put on the consumer. To go through the Suez Canal, ships now need to pay for double the crew, armed guards, and between $1 million and $3 million in war insurance in addition to the $500,000 for passage. If ships divert around the Cape of Good Hope with a 20-30% longer travel time, there is the additional cost of an increase in fuel consumption.[60] This disruption could inflate global prices by 2%.[61] Vulnerable industries include aerospace, manufacturing (especially car manufacturing), and fashion.[62]

Ongoing Yemeni Economic Crisis: In 2021 there was a sharp depletion of Yemen's currency leading to many lacking basic necessities. The unemployment rate in Yemen is about 13.57%, with 48.6% of the population below the poverty line.[63]

Assessment:

The Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea illustrate the vulnerability of widespread reliance on a single trade route. The Houthis' proximity near the Bab al-Mandab Strait and control of Hodeidah, a major port along the strait, is a threat to current and future trade and could likely contribute to a global financial crisis. Additionally, the Bab al-Mandab Strait is a major passageway for Saudi oil tankers, meaning Houthi attacks threaten the kingdom's ability to ship oil.[64]

Human Development **Level: Extremely High Risk** **Trend: Declining**

Destabilizing Factors:

Widespread Food Insecurity: Currently, about five million people in Yemen are at risk of famine.[65] Increased prices on imported food coupled with poverty have resulted in many experiencing hunger. Climate change has also led to flooding, further depleting options for food by destroying farmland.[66]

High Risk of Infectious Diseases: With 14.5 million in Yemen lacking access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, the risk of an infectious disease outbreak is a constant threat.[67] A cholera outbreak between 2016 and 2022 resulted in a million cases and thousands of deaths.[68]

Water Scarcity: Yemen is one of the world's most water-scarce countries. Population growth has led to groundwater withdrawals exceeding the annual replenishment of the store. 35% of the population has limited or unimproved drinking water sources.[69]

Assessment:

Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Between 2015 and 2022, an estimated 60% of deaths were caused by indirect causes such as hunger or lack of access to health services.[70] It is estimated by the UN that nearly 80% of the population, 24 million people, require immediate humanitarian assistance.[71] With infrastructure destroyed, resources depleted, and the government exercising limited authority, outside assistance is necessary.[72]

Environmental Stress **Level: High Risk** **Trend: Declining**

Destabilizing Factors:

Oil and Chemical Spills: In early March, a Houthi attack leading to the sinking of the freighter the *Rubymar* led to an 18-mile oil spill in the Red Sea. The *Rubymar* contains 7,000 barrels of oil and 22,000 tons of ammonium phosphate fertilizer, all at risk of spilling into the water. A large oil slick as a result of sunken ships would harm the fish population and would negatively impact regional desalination plants that provide drinking water.[73]

Climate Change: Climate change has caused both severe droughts and severe flooding in Yemen within a single calendar year. These changes have led to a lack of safe drinking water and destroyed farmland, contributing to the risk of famine.[74]

Assessment:

The most pressing environmental issue is the potential for more oil and chemical spills as a result of Houthi attacks on trading vessels. Coupled with the effects of climate change on local weather patterns, the already-scarce drinking water in the region is especially vulnerable, and any factor that could further disrupt it is likely to lead to more conflict.

International Linkages **Level: High Risk** **Trend: Stable**

Stabilizing Factors:

Foreign Intervention: Foreign intervention in the conflict, specifically the Operation Prosperity Guardian coalition, has disrupted and disabled Houthi forces to protect global trade.[75] US and British forces in particular have bombed Houthi targets. While the EU announced it will not take part in these strikes, they have dedicated maritime protection against the Houthis for ships in the Red Sea.[76]

Relationship Between The United States and Saudi Arabia: The relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia is a stabilizing factor in that they are united against Houthi extremists and favor the Yemeni government. The Saudis are the largest customer in US foreign military sales,

which are exchanged for Saudi oil.[77] Protecting global trade is mutually agreeable for both economies and they are therefore willing to invest money and arms into ending the conflict.

Destabilizing Factors:

Undisclosed Objectives of Operation Prosperity Guardian Coalition: Possible intentions of the OPG coalition, specifically underlying US intentions, could potentially further stir conflict in the region. OPG operations could potentially act as a precursor to extended US militarization in the region and the Red Sea, which would expand US influence and is in the interest of Israel's security concerns.[78] Iran and its proxy groups are fundamentally opposed to the presence of the US in the region.[79]

Assessment:

Operation Prosperity Guardian members and Saudi Arabia both intend to disable Houthi operations to protect global trade and preserve their domestic economies and interests. However, the intervention may stoke current ideological conflict if it is seen as the US overstepping or overstaying. The involvement of the EU and the eventual possibility of other international organizations contributing protection to ships in the Red Sea may reduce shipping costs, but will likely not contribute militarily.

Possible Scenarios for the Next Year

Best Case Scenario

An end to the immediate conflict would be catalyzed by an Israeli ceasefire in Gaza, which would theoretically lead to a Houthi ceasefire in the Red Sea. This would require US intervention. Several negotiations could begin in this timeframe. Specifically, in the light of the promise of a peaceful two-state solution for Israel and Palestine (a tenet of American policy), normalization efforts between Israel and the Arab states may be able to commence (notably, renewed normalization discussions with Saudi Arabia). Humanitarian aid would be given to vulnerable populations, specifically in Yemen and Gaza. Operation Prosperity Guardian members would work to contain Houthi operations, then disband once they are sufficiently weakened and negotiated with to achieve peace. In Yemen, peace talks between the Yemeni government and the Houthis (reinvigorating the process started in 2022 and negotiated by Saudi Arabia) may commence. Improved infrastructure to combat water scarcity (like better irrigation systems) and lack of sanitation and medical facilities would be able to progress. Additionally, in the absence of conflict, a constitution upholding free and fair elections may be established, giving the government more authority and accountability. Globally, alternative shipping routes (perhaps overland rail) would be explored to avoid future regional crises affecting global shipping in such a profound way.

Worst Case Scenario

There is a considerable risk of the conflict escalating and spreading. Iran and Israel may escalate attacks, resulting in war between the two countries. This would snowball and bring in proxies and allied powers. If Israel goes to war, the US is likely to join in some capacity. Iran's regional proxy capability would aim for US troops stationed in the Middle East, potentially prompting the US to declare war on Iran. War would further disrupt global trade (potentially eliminating essential trade routes and sending the world into a financial crisis). With the escalation, humanitarian aid would be slim if not eliminated, and the vulnerable populations in Yemen and Gaza would continue to suffer. Specifically in Gaza, if Israel were to go to war, there would be an increased risk of a devastating violence inflicted on Palestinian citizens. In Yemen, such a conflict could result in a massive famine or outbreak of disease. In the event of either party (Israel or Iran) feeling existentially threatened, known or unknown nuclear capabilities may be explored.

Most Likely Scenario

The conflict is likely to continue on its current trajectory for the foreseeable future. The Israel-Palestine conflict will continue to motivate the Houthis to attack ships in the Red Sea, and the members of Operation Prosperity Guardian will continue to aim for Houthi soft spots. The OPG members are likely to gain the upper hand over the Houthis, and while complete Houthi surrender at this trajectory is unlikely, they are likely to be contained or disabled if their storage sites and specialty resources like helicopters and other craft are taken out. Though China is being hit with heightened shipping costs due to the attacks, the state will likely eventually benefit from the expansion of its Belt and Road Initiative providing an alternate trading solution. The Houthis will continue to exercise majority and authoritarian control over the people of Yemen, specifically in the north, in this timeframe. The humanitarian crisis will continue without external intervention and infrastructure building.

Endnotes

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