The Amit Terrorism and Intelligence Research Institute
At the Israeli Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center

The rise in the Houthis' status within the "resistance axis" and in the regional arena

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Overview[1]

► Since the Gaza Strip War began in October 2023, the Houthis have been active participants in the multi-front hostilities waged by Iran and the "resistance axis"[2] against Israel under the pretext of supporting the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

► The Houthis also played a central role in "resistance axis" attacks on American targets during the hostilities between Iran and the United States and Israel. Beginning in September 2026, the Houthis fought successfully against Saudi Arabia and its allies in Yemen and took control of the strategic Bab al-Mandeb Strait.

► The Houthi involvement in the hostilities against Israel until the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip in October 2025, and their military achievements in Yemen were praised by members of the "resistance axis," particularly Iran and Hezbollah, which called the Houthis "an example for all Muslims."

► As the Houthis' standing rose, the status of its leader, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, also rose. Following the targeted killings of prominent leaders of the "resistance axis," especially Ali Khamenei and Hassan Nasrallah, he became a dominant figure in the axis and a leader in fighting for the "Palestinian issue."

► In recent years, the Houthis have expanded their activity on the African side of the Red Sea through assistance and cooperation with al-Qaeda's branch in Somalia and the Sudanese Armed Forces, while establishing cells and networks for smuggling weapons.

► In Amit Institute assessment, the Houthis' continued activity against Israel during the war in the Gaza Strip, even when other members of the "resistance axis" temporarily suspended theirs, as well as their involvement in attacking American and Saudi targets, raised the status of the Houthis and their leader the Muslim world in

[1] Click https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en to subscribe and receive the Amit Institute's daily updates as well as its other publications.

[2] Iran, Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Houthis in Yemen and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq.

general and in the "resistance axis" in particular and. However, pictures of Abd al-Malik al-Houthi are not yet commonly seen at demonstrations by "resistance axis" supporters outside Houthi-controlled areas, unlike pictures of Khamenei and Nasrallah, even after their elimination. In all probability he has not yet fully established himself as a leading "resistance axis" figure.

► The expansion of Houthi activity in Africa can endanger Israeli interests and assets in the region, particularly in Somaliland, which has recently initiated close relations with Israel. If hostilities between the Houthis and Israel resume, the expanding Houthi operational cells in countries such as Sudan can increase the threat to Israeli or Israel-linked vessels sailing in the Red Sea, serve as a base for attacking Israeli territory and provide stepping stones for transferring advanced weapons to arenas close to Israel, such as the Gaza Strip.

The Houthis during the Gaza Strip War

► The Houthis' involvement in the Gaza Strip War, which broke out on October 7, 2023, following the Hamas terrorist invasion of Israel and subsequent massacre, began in its first days, when their leader, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, said Yemen was prepared to respond if the United States intervened directly in the Israel-Hamas conflict. He said the Houthis coordinated fully with their allies and were prepared to respond by sending soldiers to the battlefield or by attacking with missiles, UAVs and other weapons (al-Manar, October 10, 2023).

► Within a short time, the Houthis began direct military activity under the banner of "support for the Gaza Strip" and launched dozens of UAVs and missiles at Israel. They "banned vessels from entering Israeli ports" and attacked ships in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, claiming they were Israeli-owned or the companies operating them had violated the "ban."[3]

[3] See the November 2023 ITIC (Amit Institute since May 2026) report, **The Houthis and Operation Iron Swords**, the December 2023 report, **Military-Terrorist Activities of the Houthis in Yemen during Operation Iron Swords**, the March 2024 report, **Expansion of Houthi Activities in the Red Sea**, the July 2024 report, **Escalation of the Confrontation Between Israel and the Houthis Background and Significance**, the December 2024 report, **Houthi-Israel-United States Escalation, December 2024**, the October 2025 report, **The Houthis-Israel Confrontation Following the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip**, and the weekly Spotlight on Iran reports.

►In response, Israel attacked Houthi seaports, energy installations and civilian infrastructure, and eliminated senior Houthi government officials, including the prime minister, senior members of his government and the Houthi chief of staff. In March 2025, the United States also launched a large-scale operation to lower Houthi capabilities through air and naval strikes, which ended two months later with a ceasefire between the United States and the Houthis.

►With the signing of the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip in October 2025, the Houthis said they were halting their attacks on Israel and affiliated vessels. The ceasefire was maintained except for the launch of one ballistic missile at Israel in March 2026, during the Israel-United States war against Iran.

Houthi Relations with Iran and the "Resistance Axis"

►Since the beginning of the Houthis' activity, Iran has been its main supporter and principal weapons supplier. Most of their weapons are Iranian or based on Iranian technology. According to reports, over the years Iran has transferred large quantities of weapons to them and representatives of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah terrorist operatives have trained Houthi security forces in their use.

►During the Gaza Strip War, the Iranians used various routes and methods to smuggle weapons from Iran to the Houthis, including advanced systems such as UAVs and cruise missiles, missile and UAV components and advanced communications equipment.[4][2] In addition, with the outbreak of the renewed conflict between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in September 2026, there were reports of significant Iranian Revolutionary Guards' involvement in managing the Houthi campaign, both operationally and in supplying weapons and providing training.[5]

►However, Houthi-Iran relations are complex. Although the Houthis are part of the Iranian-led "resistance axis," they have shown the willingness and ability to act independently and in accordance with their own interests, despite Iran's major role in the movement's

[4] See the August 2025 ITIC report, **Iranian Backing for the Houthis during the Gaza Strip War: the Seizure of the Al-Sharwa as a Test Case** and the October 2025 report, **The Houthis-Israel Confrontation Following the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip**.

[5] See the Amit Institute Spotlight on Iran and the Shi'ite axis reports from September 17, 2026; September 24, 2026; October 7, 2026; and October 21, 2026.

establishment and strengthening over the years of its existence. In fact, Iran may have representatives in leadership institutions.[6]

► The Houthis have relations with other members of the "resistance axis," such as Hezbollah, which assisted the Houthis in constructing their military apparatus and whose representatives perhaps participate in the movement's mechanisms, the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and the Assad regime in Syria before its fall. In recent years, reports have circulated regarding the presence of Houthi elements in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq and their cooperation with elements of the "resistance axis," such as Hezbollah,[7] the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq[8] and pro-Iranian organizations in south Syria.[9]



Haitham al-Tabataba'i, Hezbollah's top military commander, eliminated in Beirut in November 2025, photographed when he was with the Houthis in Yemen (Hezbollah in the Field Telegram channel, September 10, 2026)

► Following the outbreak of the Gaza Strip War, the "resistance axis" announced the opening of Gaza Strip "support fronts" and attacked Israel with UAVs and missiles, part of the concept of the "unity of the arenas." In June 2024 the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias and the Houthis announced their first joint attacks on Israel. Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi said it was deliberate escalation, part of the "fourth phase of the resistance" and the beginning of "important, advanced, strategic joint operations." He claimed the joint operations would have "an enormous impact" on Israel.[10]

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[6] See the February 2023 ITIC report, **The Houthi Movement and the War in Yemen: Development and Significance**

[7] See the May 2026 Amit Institute report, Spotlight on Iran and the Shi'ite Axis.

[8] See the August 2024 ITIC report, **Cooperation between the Shi'ite militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen** and the Amit Institute Spotlight on Iran and the Shi'ite Axis for August 5, 2026.

[9] See the September 2024 ITIC report, **The Houthis in Yemen threaten Israel with ground attacks**

[10] See the August 2024 ITIC report, **Cooperation between the Shi'ite militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen**

►As the war continued and expanded to additional arenas, including Iran and Yemen, cooperation among the members of the "resistance axis" grew. In some cases, they began responding to an attack against one member of the axis with attacks of their own against the party they perceived as the attacker. That occurred when Houthi forces participated in the Iranian attack on Israel on the night of April 13, 2024, by launching ballistic missiles and UAVs, in the Houthi attack on Israel on March 28, 2026, during the Israel-Iran War, and in the attacks attributed to the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq on Saudi Arabia on September 10, 2026, because of the conflict between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis.





Right: A "joint launch by Iran," the Houthis, Hezbollah and the militias in Iraq (Sabreen News, March 28, 2026). Left: A Houthi delegation meets with Iran's former supreme leader Ali Khamenei in 2019 (al-Masirah Telegram channel, August 14, 2019)

►Houthi activity in "support of the Gaza Strip" and their recent achievements against forces loyal to Saudi Arabia in Yemen were praised by Iran and members of the "resistance axis:"

- In speeches for International Jerusalem Day in March 2025, Hezbollah secretary general Na'im Qassem said "our brothers in Yemen distinguished themselves through their contribution and confrontation at sea, by launching missiles at Tel Aviv and through all their heroic deeds despite the distance." He added that "Yemen represents a qualitative addition to the struggle against the Zionist entity" (al-'Ahed, March 26 and 29, 2025). In a different speech, he praised the Houthis' "rare, exceptional heroic stance" and said "history will record that only one nation stood with such determination and honor in support of Gazans and Palestinians" (al-Manar, August 25, 2025).
- Quds Force commander Esma'il Qa'ani praised the Houthis after they launched a ballistic missile at Israel in June 2026. He said their "forceful action demonstrates the wisdom of the resistance front," adding that "a new resistance belt will extend from

the Strait of Hormuz to Bab al-Mandeb and from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea " (Shafaq News, June 8, 2026).

◆Following the Houthi takeover of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait in September 2026, Revolutionary Guards spokesperson Hossein Mohabi said the victories of Ansar Allah [the Houthis] on the western coast were "a divine victory and the fruit of years of steadfastness on the most difficult battlefields" (Hossein Mohabi's X account, September 12, 2026).

The Status of Houthi Leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi

► Given the severe blows inflicted on Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas during the Gaza Strip War, the Houthis significantly strengthened their status and influence, both within the "resistance axis" and in the Middle East in general. The eliminations of key "resistance axis" figures, especially Iranian leader Ali Khamenei and Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah, turned Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, who has headed the Houthi movement since 2004, into a leading figure in the "Palestinian struggle" and a dominant figure in the "resistance axis."[11]

► As the leader of the Houthis, who receive extensive Iranian support but have shown they are not directly subordinate to Iranian influence, al-Houthi regards Iran as an important ally but pursues a policy aimed primarily at advancing the Houthis' interests in Yemen's internal affairs and relations with regional countries such as Saudi Arabia. That is reflected in the Palestinian issue, which is noted in al-Houthi's weekly speeches, in which it plays (at least declaratively) an important role in the movement's policy toward its allies, neighbors and principal enemies, the United States and Israel (*Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 2025).

► Despite his regular appearances and speeches in Houthi media, al-Houthi has been discrete and avoided public exposure for more than a decade. According to reports, he hides in the mountainous areas under Houthi control for fear of being targeted. Beyond his role as political and military leader, he has religious authority and is perceived by the Zaidi branch of Islam as a direct descendant and heir of the Prophet Muhammad. Like Hassan Nasrallah, who was a religious authority as well as a political leader, he has concentrated power and is

[11] See the February 2023 ITIC report, **The Houthi Movement and the War in Yemen: Development and Significance**

central to the conduct of the Houthi movement and important to its continued existence and strengthening (*Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 2025; *Le Monde*, October 19, 2026).

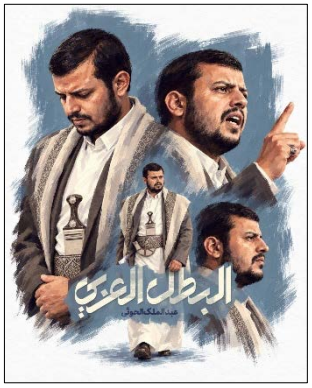


Abd al-Malik al-Houthi delivers a speech (al-Masirah Telegram account, August 30, 2026)

► Al-Houthi's speeches are prominently covered by media outlets affiliated with the "resistance axis," which sometimes broadcast them in full. Posters have been issued representing him as one of the most important leaders in the Arab world. Hezbollah's current secretary general, Na'im Qassem, called al-Houthi an "exceptional leader" in a speech in January 2025 (al-'Ahed, January 18, 2025).

► Lebanese journalist Nasser Qandil, a former member of parliament affiliated with the Hezbollah camp who participated in the fighting against Israel in 1978 and 1982, claimed that following Hassan Nasrallah's death, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi bore "the burden of the axis and is worthy of the responsibility" (Yemen Monitor, March 13, 2025). However, pictures of al-Houthi are still not a common sight at "resistance axis" demonstrations outside Houthi-controlled areas, unlike pictures of Khamenei and Nasrallah, even after their eliminations.

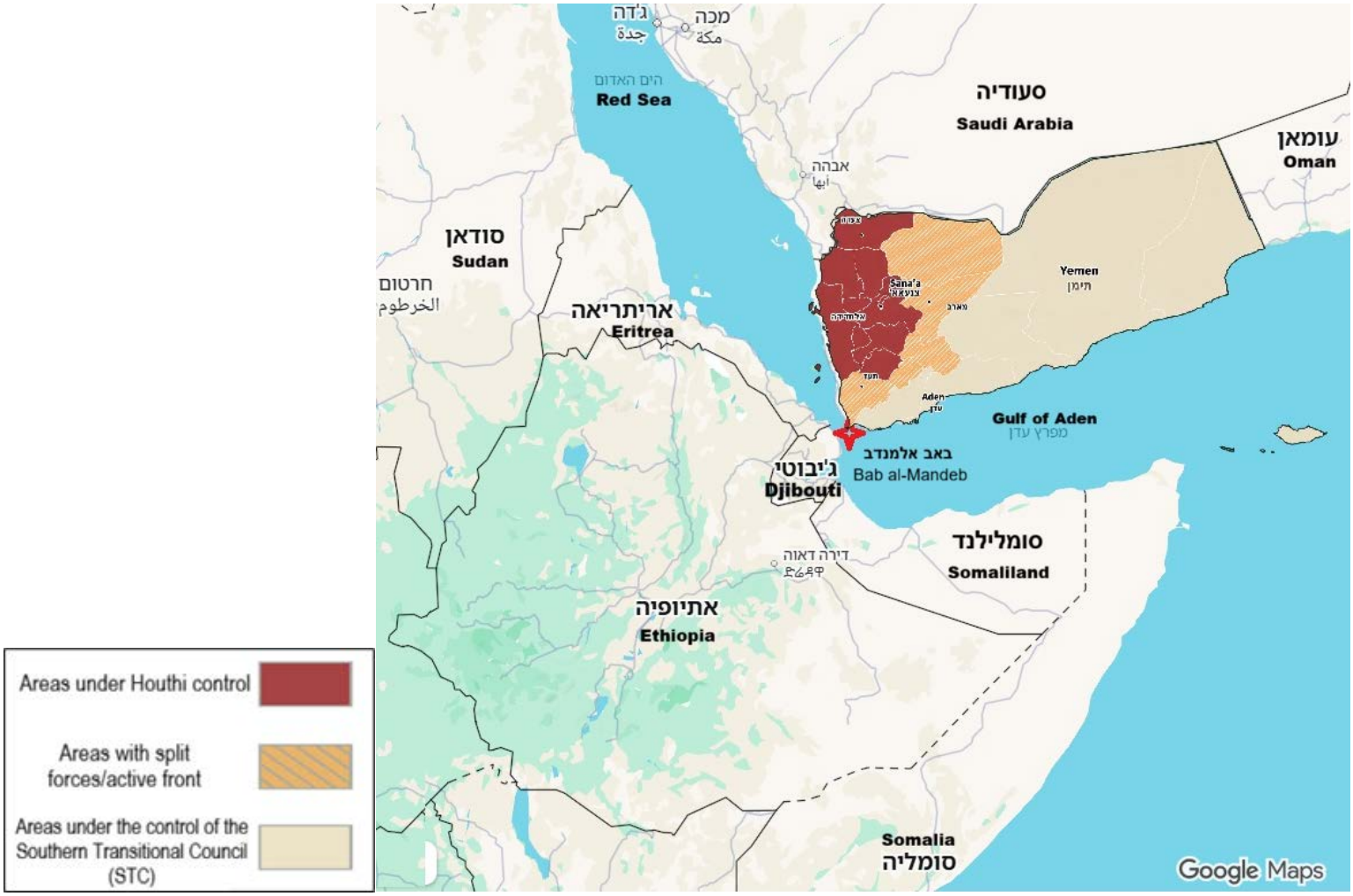




Right: "The Arab hero." A notice honoring al-Houthi on an Iranian social network (Peshro57_67 page on the Virasty network, October 8, 2026). Left: Praise for al-Houthi and the Houthis' weapons. The Arabic reads, "The Houthi will burn you;" from a Hezbollah-affiliated account (Hezbollah in the Field Telegram channel, September 7, 2026)

Expansion of Houthi Activity into the Horn of Africa

► In recent years, particularly since the beginning of the Gaza Strip War, the Houthis have expanded their activity in the Red Sea are, with significant capabilities for disrupting maritime traffic along the strategic shipping routes in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. With Iranian assistance, they have used the maritime region and created ties with elements on its African side to establish a smuggling network for weapons and other goods.[12]



Areas under Houthi control and the Horn of Africa

Relations with al-Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia

► Initial reports of the use of Somalia as a platform for transferring weapons and equipment to the Houthis were published as early as 2020 (*Foreign Policy*, July 17, 2020). Two years later, a UN panel of experts on Somalia reported it had identified a smuggling route between

[12] See the December 2025 ITIC report, **Iranian Activity in East Africa: A Growing Threat to Israeli and Western Interests**

Somalia and Yemen through which advanced Iranian weapons were transferred to the Houthis via Somalia. According to the report, al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's branch in the Horn of Africa, operates in Somalia and maintains another channel of activity in Yemen, through which its operatives are trained by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen in the use of heavy weapons. It was further reported that various types of weapons were transferred from Yemen to al-Shabaab in Somalia by AQAP operatives (UN Security Council website, October 10, 2022).

► According to other UN reports, the smuggling routes and activities developed considerably during the Gaza Strip War, with the Houthis strengthening their ties with AQAP in Yemen and al-Shabaab in Somalia on both sides of the maritime area. The Houthis prepared to attack vessels sailing along the Somali coast through strong relations with al-Shabaab. At the same time, the frequency of operations to smuggle Iranian weapons between the Houthis and al-Shabaab increased significantly (UN Security Council website, October 11 and 28, 2024).

► According to later UN Security Council reports, an operational relationship between al-Shabaab and the Houthis was gradually established based on smuggling, with al-Shabaab asking the Houthis to supply them with advanced weapons and train them in their use. In return, al-Shabaab representatives offered to expand piracy off the Somali coast to disrupt maritime traffic in the Arabian Sea and provide intelligence on vessel movements near the Somali coast. In addition, AQAP signed a nonaggression pact with the Houthis which included the transfer of advanced weapons (including UAVs), which may subsequently have been transferred to al-Shabaab as well (UN Security Council website, February 6 and July 24, 2025).

► According to other reports, the relationship between the organizations also included tactical and operational training provided by the Houthis to hundreds of al-Shabaab operatives in Yemen, as well as instruction in the use and even manufacture of UAVs. That would significantly upgrade al-Shabaab's operational capabilities and pose a considerable challenge to the forces fighting it in Somalia (UN Security Council website, October 17, 2025; al-Hurra (MBN), May 13, 2026; *Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2026).

► In addition, an extensive smuggling network between Iran and the Houthis was exposed, spanning numerous countries in East Africa and the Middle East, including Somalia. As part of the network, crew members, including Somalis, were recruited and transferred to Iran,

where they were assigned to vessels used for smuggling operations. The smuggled equipment, which included cruise missiles, anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles and UAVs, was transferred to Houthi-controlled territory along three main routes, one of which passed through the port of Bosaso in northern Somalia.[13] Although the port of Bosaso is not located in al-Shabaab's areas of operation, the organization may be involved in smuggling through the port or in the adjacent maritime area, either by assisting in the activities themselves or by recruiting crew members in Somalia.

The Houthis and Israel's Recognition of Somaliland's Independence

►On December 26, 2025, Israel became the first UN member to officially recognize Somaliland as an independent, sovereign state. Somaliland, a region which declared its independence from Somalia in 1991, lies on the coast of the Gulf of Aden near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, in a strategically important location which could threaten nearby Houthi-controlled territory, weapons smuggling into their areas and their efforts to disrupt maritime traffic in the region.

►Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi called Israel's recognition of Somaliland "an aggressive step within the enemy's plot against our Islamic nation," and added that it was also "directed against Yemen and the Red Sea, and had to be opposed at all levels." According to al-Houthi, "the Israeli enemy" sought to turn Somaliland into an outpost for hostile activities against Somalia, African countries, Yemen and Arab countries which would threaten the security of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. He said they regarded any Israeli presence in Somaliland as "a military target for our forces " (al-Masirah, December 28, 2025).



Israeli President Herzog meets Somaliland President Abd al-Rahman Muhammad Abdallah (Irro) in Jerusalem (Isaac Herzog's Facebook page, June 14, 2026)

[13] See the August 2025 ITIC report, **Iranian Backing for the Houthis during the Gaza Strip War: the Seizure of the Al-Sharwa as a Test Case**

► Unofficially, relations between Israel and Somaliland are also reflected in matters of security. Sources in Somaliland said Israel was preparing to establish a military base from which it could gather intelligence and possibly operate against the Houthis in Yemen, who are located approximately 260 km away on the other side of the Gulf of Aden (Bloomberg, March 11, 2026). A Houthi military source said they were closely monitoring all Israeli movements in Somaliland and the "hostile military base" was on the "list of targets for the next confrontation with Israel." He added that attacking military bases in the Horn of Africa and preventing the passage of ships belonging to the "Israeli enemy" and its allies would recur, depending on "Israeli aggression" (*al-Akhbar,* March 13, 2026).

► Given the Houthis' recent military achievements in southern Yemen and their takeover of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait during September 2026, Israeli assets and interests in Somaliland, if they indeed exist, could be threatened because of the short distance between the strait and Somaliland (about 150 km, compared with 1,600 km between Yemen and Israel). The Houthis have demonstrated, both in the past and the present conflict with Saudi Arabia, that they are capable of attacking targets at similar distances with considerable force and frequency while successfully circumventing Saudi Arabia's air defense systems. On the other hand, the short distance may make it easier for Israel to gather intelligence and enable it to operate effectively against concentrations of Houthi forces on Yemeni territory or against Houthi assets in the maritime area or on African soil to disrupt their activity.

► The Houthis also threatened to attack American assets in the region because of the hostilities between the United States and Iran. In March 2026, during the war between Israel and the United States and Iran, the Houthis reportedly monitored American movements at bases in the Horn of Africa. A Houthi military source said Sana'a's "finger is on the trigger and our eyes are wide open regarding all movements in the Red Sea. The military decision on the matter depends on developments in the war" (*al-Akhbar*, March 31, 2026).

The Houthis' Relations with Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti

► In recent years information has been published about a smuggling and support network established by the Houthis between Yemen and Sudan, based on Iran's overt support for the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by Sudanese leader Abd al-Fattah al-Burhan, in his country's civil war. The Houthis were reportedly brought into the relationship between Iran and the SAF in 2024 and began transferring weapons on Iran's behalf. Shipments of weapons and other components reach Sudan as part of an extensive regional smuggling network

which includes Iran, the Houthis and African elements such as al-Shabaab, and are sent to Sudan or transferred from there to other countries through the country's ports (Erem News, October 25, 2026). According to reports, in May 2026, a weapons shipment transferred from the Houthis to SAF forces was seized and might have been intended for Hamas in the Gaza Strip. According to other reports, the Houthis also sent experts to Sudan to train SAF forces in the operation and manufacture of Iranian-made UAVs.[14]

► Other reports indicate the Houthis are strengthening their ties and foothold in Eritrea with Iranian assistance. The Houthis reportedly established smuggling and recruitment networks among the Afar community living in Eritrea, Djibouti and Ethiopia, whom they transfer to Yemen to serve the movement's needs. It was also reported that the Houthis operate cells in countries in the region, particularly Djibouti and Ethiopia (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 16, 2025).

► Djibouti, which is located near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, is also involved in the Houthi smuggling network. In August 2025, crew members of a vessel seized by forces of the internationally-recognized Yemeni government while attempting to smuggle weapons and equipment to the Houthis discovered that one of the smuggling routes from Iran to the Houthis passes through Djibouti, where equipment arriving from Iran is unloaded and loaded onto another vessel en route to Houthi-controlled ports. In addition, between 2023 and 2025, companies operating from Djibouti purchased large quantities of equipment, including chemicals and electronic equipment that could be used to manufacture and operate advanced weapons, and transferred it in small vessels to Houthi-controlled seaports.[15]

► Developments in the Houthis' relations with countries in the Horn of Africa increase concerns that the Houthis may establish a logistical infrastructure extending along the African coast of the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, from Somalia in the south to Sudan in the north. It could serve as a force multiplier for the capabilities of Iran and he "resistance axis"

[14] From Spoke to Hub: The Houthis in Africa, The Century Foundation, August 24, 2026.

[15] Ibid; see the August 2025 ITIC report, **Iranian Backing for the Houthis during the Gaza Strip War: the Seizure of the Al-Sharwa as a Test Case**

in general and the Houthis' in particular to threaten the strategic interests of countries in the region and the international community.





Right: Smuggling routes from the port of Bandar Abbas in Iran to the port of al-Salif in Houthi-controlled Yemen (legitimate Yemeni government combat information X account, August 9, 2025). Left: Weapons found aboard a vessel destined for the Houthis (X account of US Central Command, July 16, 2025)