



# Expansion of Houthi Activities in the Red Sea

March 25, 2024

## Overview<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ During the past two months the activities of the Houthis in Yemen have expanded. They have continued attacking targets they define as "Israeli" or "supporting Israel," mainly vessels sailing in the Red Sea on sea lanes passing through Israel, and have declared their intention to expand their attacks to the Indian Ocean and the sea route around the southern tip of Africa. Meanwhile, they have attacked American and British warships, as well as ships belonging to European Union countries which joined the campaign against the Houthi threat, all of which they claim help Israel and all of which attack Houthi forces in Yemeni territory.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ Three missiles were launched at Israel, one of which entered Israel's airspace and exploded in its territory, without damage or casualties, the first time for such an occurrence. Nevertheless, there has recently been a noticeable decline in the number of missiles and UAVs launched at Israeli territory compared to the beginning of the war.
- ▶ The attacks in the Red Sea have caused tensions between the United States and Iran to escalate and the two trade accusations, with Iran protesting the accusations of the coalition forces in Yemen while the coalition accuses Iran of supporting the Houthi attacks and aiding its military buildup.
- ▶ In ITIC assessment, the conflict in the Red Sea area will continue as long as the war in the Gaza Strip continues, and may escalate if the Houthis do in fact make good on their threat to attack ships in the Indian Ocean and thereby endanger the Asia's entire maritime trade with the West. Faced with such an eventuality, the coalition forces may respond by significantly

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<sup>1</sup> Click <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en> to subscribe and receive the ITIC's daily updates as well as its other publications.

<sup>2</sup> This is the fourth ITIC report dealing with the activities of the Houthis during the Gaza War. The previous reports were issued in November 2023, "[The Houthis and Operation Iron Swords](#);" December 2023, "[Military-Terrorist Activities of the Houthis in Yemen during Operation Iron Swords](#);" and January 2024, "Houthi military-terrorist escalation and the deterioration of the situation in the Red Sea"<https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/houthi-military-terrorist-escalation-and-the-deterioration-of-the-situation-in-the-red-sea/>."

increasing their attacks to exact a price high enough to discourage the Houthis from continuing. At this stage, apparently only the end of the war in the Gaza Strip or significant Iranian pressure on the Houthis will effect a lull in the campaign.

## The Houthi Arena

- ▶ During the first months of 2024 the Houthi forces continued to attack targets that they defined as "Israeli" or "supporting Israel."<sup>3</sup> They often attacked vessels sailing in the Red Sea on sea lanes passing through Israel and American and European warships, which the Houthis claim "help" Israel and attack the Houthi forces in Yemeni territory. The attacks on Israeli territory have declined compared to the beginning of the war, apparently due to their relative lack of success in penetrating the Israeli air defenses and, and perhaps because the Houthis have emptied their arsenal of long-range missiles and UAVs.
- ▶ At the beginning of the campaign, the Houthis declared they attacked only ships "with connections to Israel." Later, and as the presence of American and European warships in the Red Sea increased, responding to the Houthi attacks first by intercepting missiles and UAVs, and later with attacks on Yemen, the Houthis began to attack the warships as well. For example, on January 30, 2024, the Houthis launched anti-ship cruise missiles at the USS Gravelly, which intercepted them (United States Central Command (CENTCOM) X account, January 31, 2024). In response, **Yahya Saree, the spokesman for the Houthi armed forces**, stated that the missiles targeted the USS Gravelly, and that all the American and British warships in the Red and Arabian seas participating in "aggression" against them were in the Houthi forces' bank of targets (Yahya Saree's X account, January 30, 2024).
- ▶ in addition to increasing the attacks, the Houthis improved their rate of accuracy and in several cases caused significant damage to vessels. For example, during February 2024, at least seven vessels were hit by Houthi missiles and UAVs. A particularly severe attack occurred on February 18, 2024, when the MV Rubymar was hit and significantly damaged by an anti-ship ballistic missile (CENTCOM X account, February 19, 2024; Sir Chilliebean's X Account, 19 Feb 2024). Two weeks later, CENTCOM confirmed that the MV Rubymar, which flew the flag of Belize, had indeed sunk after being hit by a Houthi ballistic missile. It was also reported that the ship was carrying about 21,000 tons of ammonium fertilizer, which is harmful to the

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<sup>3</sup> According to data from The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, since the beginning of the war 60 Houthi attacks have been recorded (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 21, 2024).

environment (CENTCOM X account, March 3, 2024). In March 2024, Houthi attacks continued to damage vessels. The deadliest attack since the start of the war occurred on March 6, 2024, when an anti-ship ballistic missile hit the True Confidence, killing three people and injuring four, and significantly damaging the ship (CENTCOM X account, March 7, 2024). It was the first Houthi attack in which crew members were killed.

► Since the beginning of the war the Houthis have reiterated their claim that their attacks will stop only when Israel stops its "aggression" in the Gaza Strip and lifts the [so-called] "siege" of Gaza. **Abdalmalik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthis**, reiterated the claim in a speech on February 8, 2024, in which he stated that the attacks by the United States and its allies had not affected the Houthis' military capabilities, their operations continued and they would not stop until the "aggression" and the "siege" of the Gaza Strip ended. He said the Houthis would continue to help "Palestine" with their "naval operations" until the aggression ceased, and claimed the "operations" were "definitely" damaging Israel's economy (al-Masirah, February 8, 2024). He repeated himself on other occasions later in February and March 2024. Accordingly, despite the escalation of the conflict and the increase in attacks on Houthi targets in Yemen, **for now the Houthis show no intention of renegeing on their terms for the end of the attacks.**

► A significant development occurred on March 14, 2024, when Abdalmalik al-Houthi announced a prohibition on the passage of ships with "connections to Israel" even through the Indian Ocean and past South Africa from the Cape of Good Hope. He said that the continuation of the American-British "aggression" against Yemen would not stop their actions and they would continue to act [attack] as long as the "aggression" and the "siege" of the Strip continued. He threatened to continue to expand the scope of their activities to areas "the enemy never expected" (Houthi Telegram channel, March 14, 2024). The following day, **Yahya Saree, spokesman for the Houthis' armed forces**, announced they had begun attacking "Israeli or Israeli-linked" vessels in the Indian Ocean as well and in the sea lanes leading to the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, alternative routes for ships that chose not to sail near Yemen or in the Red Sea. In addition, Saree claimed that the Houthi forces had carried out "three operations" against three "Israeli and American" ships in the Indian Ocean using missiles and UAVs, and that the operations had achieved their goals. In practice, the attacks were not detected (Yahya Saree's X account, March 15, 2024) .



חל איסור על ישראל להפליג באוקיינוס ההודי ובכף התקווה הטובה ..

Translate post



**Two notices published after the Houthis' statement on the expansion of their activities to the Indian Ocean and the shipping route that passes south of the African continent (Hazem al-Assad's X account, March 15, 2024)**

## Houthi attacks on Israel

- ▶ The attacks on Israel have continued in recent months, even though the most recent were a small part of the Houthi attacks. On February 2, 2024, the Hetz aerial defense system successfully intercepted a surface-to-surface missile in the Red Sea area that was en route to Israeli territory (IDF spokesperson, February 2, 2024). The following day, **Yahya Saree** confirmed they had attacked specific targets in Eilat with several ballistic missiles (Yahya Saree's Telegram channel, February 3, 2024). Another attack took place on February 22, 2024, when the Hetz aerial defense system detected a long-range ballistic missile launched from the direction of Yemen at Israel. The system followed the trajectory of the missile and intercepted it beyond Israel's borders (IDF spokesperson, February 22, 2024). Yahya Saree claimed that in response to the American-British aggression, they had launched ballistic missiles and UAVs at various targets in the Eilat region (Yahya Saree's Telegram channel, February 22, 2024).
- ▶ In March 2024 the Houthis continued to attack Israel. On March 18, 2024, the IDF spokesperson announced that a suspicious target crossed into Israeli territory from the Red Sea region and fell in an open area north of Eilat (IDF spokesperson, March 18, 2024). The next day, the Houthi forces confirmed that they had launched a number of cruise missiles at "Umm Rashrash" [Eilat] which had successfully hit their targets (al-Masirah X account, March 19, 2024). Confirmation came from the IDF spokesperson later when he issued a statement that a cruise missile arriving from the direction of the Red Sea had fallen in an open area north of Eilat. No casualties or damage were reported, and according to reports, the incident was

under investigation (IDF spokesperson, March 19, 2024 ). It was the first time a Houthi missile or UAV had penetrated Israeli airspace and landed in its territory. Another Houthi attack on Eilat was recorded on March 21, 2024, when a "suspicious aerial target" was intercepted by the IDF before it entered Israeli territory (IDF Account X, March 21, 2024).



**Right: The cruise missile that the Houthis claim was launched and exploded north of Eilat (al-Masirah Telegram channel, March 19, 2024). Left: The al-Masirah homepage reports the attack in Eilat (al-Masirah Telegram channel, March 20, 2024)**

► In another attempt to strengthen their claim that Israel was their main target, despite developments, on February 3, 2024, the Houthis conducted a military exercise called "Yemen for Palestine" which simulated attacks on Israeli posts and "settlements" [cities, towns and villages], kidnapping soldiers and using suicide drones to attack Israeli targets (Houthi media information center, February 3, 2024). On March 9, 2024, the Houthis conducted a combined exercise of armored, artillery and infantry forces, which the organization claimed was to prepare the forces for the "war of victory and holy jihad." The Houthi operatives simulated occupying Israeli positions, firing machine guns, launching suicide drones and rockets, kidnapping soldiers from armored vehicles and attacking IDF vehicles with IEDs (Houthi combat information X account, March 9, 2024; Houthi September 26 website, March 9, 2024).



**Right: Simulation of kidnapping an Israeli soldier (Houthi combat information X account, March 9, 2024). Left: Simulation of occupying an Israeli post and kidnapping soldiers (Houthi media information center, February 3, 2024)**

## Houthi political activity

► As the campaign in the Red Sea continues and more international forces are dragged in and global attention increases, the Houthis' relationship with actors in the Middle East and beyond has also been affected. On March 7, 2024, a senior operative in Hamas military-terrorist wing said the Houthis (Ansar Allah) had informed them that the latest escalation in the Red Sea was their response to Israel's intention to attack Rafah and continue its [alleged] "policy of starvation." The operative claimed the Houthis had sent a message to the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades for their "opinion" on negotiations for the release of the ship's crew they were holding, [allegedly] stating that any decision would be made "exclusively" by the Brigades. The Houthis also informed the Brigades of their strategic decision to continue the "campaign" in the Red Sea until the end of the "aggression" and the lifting of the "siege" on the Gaza Strip. The operative claimed that the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades had been in contact and coordinating with the "fighting fronts" in Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq since the first hours of Operation al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023 (al-Jazeera TV website, March 7, 2024). **Osama Hamdan, a senior Hamas member**, claimed the "brothers" in Yemen had contacted the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades leadership at an early stage, and when attempts were made to negotiate for the return of the ship seized by the Houthis, their leadership told the negotiators that the decision rested with Hamas, and Hamas and the Houthis were discussing the matter. He claimed the "resistance activity" [terrorist attacks] of the Houthis was not an emotional reaction but a "calculated activity" executed according to a specific point of view (al-Manar TV X account, March 7, 2024).

- ▶ According to reports, on March 16, 2024, a meeting of Houthi, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) representatives was held to discuss the "expansion of the conflict and the encirclement of Israel" and collaboration in preparation for the "next phase" in the war in the Gaza Strip (al-Arabiya, March 16, 2024).
- ▶ On March 16, 2024, **Ali al-Qahoum, a senior member of the Houthi political bureau**, stated that relations were continuously developing between Russia, China and the BRICS countries [Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa] to weaken the Western countries. He claimed they were cooperating in a variety of areas to "drown the United States, Britain and the West in the Red Sea" (Ali al-Qahoum's X account, March 16, 2024). At the end of January 2024 a Houthi delegation met in Moscow with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov to discuss the war in the Gaza Strip and the "campaign" in the Red Sea.
- ▶ Another development in the relations between the Houthis, Russia and China was noted on March 21, 2024, when the Bloomberg News Agency reported from "sources" that the Houthis told China and Russia that their ships could sail through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden without being attacked. The sources added that Beijing and Moscow had reached an understanding following talks held in Oman by their diplomats and the Houthi spokesman, Mohammad Abdul Salam. The sources claimed that in return, the two countries might give the Houthis political support in a number of bodies, such as the Security Council. It was also reported that it was not completely clear what such support would be, but it could include blocking resolutions against the Houthis (Bloomberg, March 21, 2024). However, neither the Houthis, Russia nor China has confirmed the report. In reality, on March 24, 2024, the Houthis launched five missiles at a Chinese-owned ship sailing in the Red Sea. The ship incurred minor damages; a fire broke out which was quickly extinguished and no injuries were reported (CENTCOM X account, March 24, 2024).

## Activities of the United States and Its Allies

- ▶ As the Houthi attacks increased in the first months of 2024, so did the attacks of the American-led coalition forces on Yemen. The coalition intercepted Houthi missiles and UAVs launched at vessels, which has become an almost daily occurrence. A significant part of the coalition forces' offensive operations are defined as "preventive," intended to damage the Houthis' offensive capabilities, such as missiles and UAVs ready for launch, or the systems that control and monitor them.

► On February 4, 2024, **American Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin** announced that coalition forces had attacked 36 Houthi targets in Yemen, including underground facilities, weapons stores and missile launchers. He stated that the attacks were designed to disrupt the Houthis' capabilities and make it clear that if they continued attacking, they would continue to suffer the consequences (United States Department of Defense website, February 4, 2024). About three weeks later, Secretary of Defense Austin announced that the American and British armies had attacked Houthi military targets in areas under their control in Yemen, with the support of Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and New Zealand. He reported that eight sites had been attacked, including underground weapons storage facilities, missile storage facilities, unmanned aerial systems, civil defense systems, radars and a helicopter (Pentagon website, February 25, 2024). Another source reported that the American and British strikes hit 18 Houthi targets at eight sites in Yemen (Reuters, February 25, 2024).

► The United States-led joint naval force is not alone in operating against the Houthis in the Red Sea area. On January 31, 2024, the European Union's defense ministers met in Brussels to discuss the establishment of a naval force to protect all shipping in the Red Sea (European Union website, January 31 2024). **Josep Borrell, the EU foreign minister**, stated said they were promoting the establishment of a naval force to protect vessels in the area and emphasized that the force would act according to the threat faced and would not act on land, only at sea (Euronews network, February 1, 2024). **European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen** announced that on February 20, 2024, the European Union would officially launch an operation to help protect international shipping in the Red Sea from Houthi attacks. She stated that Europe would ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea through activity with its international partners (X account of the president of the European Commission, February 19, 2024). The force began operating on February 19, 2024, when participating vessels were instructed to carry out "preventive operations" only. The force's first activity was a German Navy ship interception of two Houthi drones on February 27, 2024 (the Operations Page on the EU website, February 27, 2024).



**A French destroyer, part of the European Red Sea Task Force during the interception of four drones launched by the Houthis (European Red Sea Task Force X Account, March 9, 2024)**

## **UN Security Council deliberations and resolutions**

► The UN Security Council became another arena for the Red Sea conflict and a place to trade accusations regarding responsibility for continuing the campaign. At a meeting of the Security Council on February 14, 2024, the United States representative to the UN called on the Security Council to demand the Houthis stop attacking ships, adding that Iran could not deny its role in supporting attacks carried out by the Houthis, in light of its long-term material support for the Houthis' destabilizing actions (website of the United States mission to the UN, February 14, 2024). In the past, Houthi and Iranian spokesmen admitted several times that Iran supported the Houthis' activities and that it helped strengthen the movement, but both sides deny direct Iranian involvement in the current campaign. The Iranians claim that the Houthis' decisions and actions are independent and based on their own considerations, contrary to American and European reports and statements that Iran is in fact directly involved in the campaign in the Red Sea and assists the Houthis in planning their "activities," both operationally and with intelligence. Iran transfers advanced weapons to Yemen, trains Houthi forces and provides them with intelligence to attack ships in the area. **In ITIC assessment, Iran is deeply involved in the Houthi "campaign" and helps them in various ways, but it is not clear to what extent Iran can stop the Houthis from attacking.**

► Similar statements were made at a Security Council meeting on March 14, 2024, where the American representatives called for acting "with one voice" against the violation of freedom of navigation, and claimed that the Houthis' actions harmed the population in Yemen and did not help the population in Gaza. The representatives from France accused the Houthis of being solely responsible for escalation in the Red Sea and demanded that Iran desist from

actions which "provoke instability" and helped the Houthis. Similar statements were also made by the representatives of Great Britain and Japan, while the representatives of China and Russia claimed that the escalation was a result of the expansion of the war in Gaza and the increasing involvement of the United States and Europe in the "campaign" in the Red Sea (UN website, March 14, 2024).

► At a third meeting on March 18, 2024, the Security Council condemned the Houthi attacks on March 6, 2024, which resulted in the death of three people, and the Houthi attack on the MV Rubymar on February 18, 2024. The Security Council also demanded the immediate release of the Galaxy Leader ship and its crew. Security Council members called for overall cooperation with the Yemeni government to prevent the Houthis from acquiring the weapons and emphasized the importance of the maritime route in the Red Sea (UN website, March 18, 2024).

## United States-Iran relations

► With the continuation of the attacks in the Red Sea, the United States and Iran continued trading accusations beyond the UN's corridors regarding Iranian involvement. The United States continued to claim, as it did from the beginning of the "campaign," that Iran was behind the actions of the Houthis. **American Secretary of State Anthony Blinken** made similar comments during an interview with the al-Hadath news channel. The interview was published on the American State Department website, indicating its importance. Referring to the Red Sea, Blinken said there was no justification for the Houthis' attacks on international shipping, regardless of the different opinions regarding the war in Gaza, and he "would like" Iran to exert its influence on the Houthis to stop their attacks. He further asserted that in his opinion Iran no longer wanted to continue supporting the Houthi attacks, given their general global condemnation (State Department website, March 20, 2024).

► Iran did not remain indifferent to those and similar accusations voiced in the Security Council and elsewhere. On February 25, 2024, **Nasser Kanaani, the spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry**, published a statement condemning the continued American and British attacks in Yemen. He claimed the attacks broke international law, violated Yemen's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and were intended to ensure Israel's security. He added that the United States and Britain had proven once again that they fully supported the [alleged] "war crimes and genocide of the Zionist regime in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank" and that the purpose of their attacks in Yemen was to increase regional tension, instability

and the scope of the war, and divert public attention from Israel's [alleged] "war crimes" (Mehr, February 25, 2024). A similar statement was made on March 19, 2024, by **Saeed Irvani, the Iranian ambassador to the UN**, that Britain "misused" the Security Council, which had condemned the Houthi attacks the previous day before, and made [allegedly] "baseless" claims against Iran. He claimed the objective of the accusations against Iran was to advance the American-British political agenda and provide legitimacy for their [allegedly] "illegal" actions against Yemen (ISNA, March 19, 2024).

► As they have in the past, even during the first months of 2024, the coalition forces continued to prevent and seize weapons shipments en route to the Houthi territories on the grounds that the ships sailed from Iran, which was responsible for them. For example, on February 13, 2024, the al-Arabiya network reported that according to "sources," at the end of January 2024 the United States Coast Guard took control of a ship in the Arabian Sea which was carrying weapons from a port in Iran and sailing to southern Oman or Yemen. The American forces seized the ship's crew and confiscated its cargo, which they said was destined for the Houthis (al-Arabiya, February 13, 2024). Another event occurred on January 28, 2024, but was only announced on February 15, 2024, by CENTCOM. According to the report, American military forces seized advanced weapons on vessels in the Arabian Sea, en route from Iran to areas controlled by the Houthis in Yemen. According CENTCOM, the continued supply of weapons to the Houthis was in direct violation of international law and harmed maritime trade, and they were obligated to act together with their allies to deal with the deadly Iranian aid to the region, by all legal means, including the imposition of sanctions (CENTCOM, February 15, 2024).



**An Iranian ship smuggling weapons to the Houthis and captured by the United States Navy, and the weapons found aboard (CENTCOM X account, February 15, 2024)**

► Tensions between the United States and Iran caused by the war in the Gaza Strip have apparently also influenced the relationship between the United States and its allies in the Middle East. On February 14, 2024, according to "sources familiar with the matter," several Arab states, including the UAE, limited American use of military facilities on their soil to carry out airstrikes on Iranian proxies. An "official" in the West said that the UAE took the step because it did not want to be seen as opposed to Iran or be portrayed as too close to the West and Israel. An "American official" confirmed the information, stating that countries trying to defuse tensions with Iran were increasingly restricting the United States and its partners from carrying out self-defense operations from their soil (Politico news website, February 14, 2024). In ITIC assessment, there are additional, more significant considerations behind the unwillingness of the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia to be involved in the Red Sea campaign, such as Saudi Arabian contacts with the Houthis for a long-term cease-fire agreement in the war between them (which began before the war in the Gaza Strip), and an unwillingness to take an obvious side in the current war.

► Given the tensions between the United States and Iran, the British daily Financial Times reported that according to "American and Iranian sources," the United States conducted secret talks with Iran during the year to convince it to use its influence with the Houthis to end the attacks in the Red Sea. According to the paper, the negotiations began in January 2024 and were conducted indirectly through Oman. The negotiations on behalf of the United States were conducted by **Brett McGurk, the United States president's envoy to the Middle East**. The talks on behalf of Iran were conducted by Ali Bagheri Kani, the deputy minister of foreign affairs (Financial Times, March 14, 2024).

► "Iranian sources" denied the reports, claiming that their exchange of messages and contacts with the United States was limited only to negotiations regarding the lifting of sanctions on Iran, calling reports of talks between the two countries regarding the situation in the Red Sea "psychological warfare" conducted by the United States to hide its failure in the diplomatic arena (IRNA, March 14, 2024).

► Reliable information about direct Iranian activity in the Yemen has been rare in recent years, and even more so since the beginning of the war in the Gaza Strip. However, a sign of such activity appeared on March 18, 2024, following a report that "Yemeni sources" told the Arabic Sky News channel that 15 foreign experts, including Iranians and experts from Hezbollah,

were killed in American-British strikes in Yemen (Telegram, March 18, 2024). The news was reported briefly and so far had not been referenced by other sources.