

THE WIDER WORLD

Update on Middle East Crisis: *A look at the Houthis and Iran's aims*

By Diane Chido
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Soon after the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023, I offered an [overview](#) of the history of the conflict in Palestine to provide an understanding of how a complex set of factors developed over time have brought us to where we are today. In a subsequent [essay](#), I forecasted how the U.S. military might have to manage broader violence in the region. As the conflict continues and has evolved, we are overdue for an update.

The initial Hamas attack on Israel resulted in the immediate deaths of 1,200 people in Israel and the abduction of 240 more. As many as 120 of these hostages are still held in Gaza, as far as authorities know. The rest have been killed by either Hamas or, mistakenly, by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), or released. At the same time, Israeli ground and air counterattacks have killed an estimated 28,000 Palestinians and displaced nearly all of the 2.3 million who live in Gaza.^[i] The initial attack was horrific, and Israel's need for a response understandable, but now there is an enormous humanitarian crisis in Gaza with the United Nations reporting that more than half a million Gazans are in danger of starvation.^[ii]

As previously reported, *Hamas* is a portmanteau of the group's official name in Arabic, translated as the Islamic Resistance Movement. It was originally established as a religious charity in 1971 but became increasingly political and militant in the late 1980s. It arose in opposition to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) because of the PLO's efforts to reconcile with Israel. Thus,

Hamas' stated goals are to oppose any efforts at peace with Israel and to establish a permanent Palestinian state in the region. Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has declared there will be no two-state solution at the end of this immediate conflict, which leaves any plans for a peaceful settlement at a standstill.

Many escalations have taken place since the beginning of this crisis, stoking fears of a much larger conflict or several amalgamated conflicts in the region. The main concern is that an already large number of armed groups with religious and localized goals before the Hamas attack and Israeli reaction have now galvanized into a singular purpose. Even the traditional Shi'a-Sunni split in Islam is putting these factions aside as all Islamic groups join to oppose Israel.^[iii]



Contemporary map of the Middle East

After World War I, the Ottoman Empire essentially dissolved and became what is today modern Turkey. The Central Asian and Caucasus countries became part of the Russian Empire until 1917, when the revolution declared that nation to be the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Iran became the independent Persian Empire led by the Shah; Egypt became independent under a British protectorate; and the [Levant](#) (typically considered to consist of today's Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and the off-shore island of Cyprus) were divided into their essentially current formations by France and Britain as spoils of war under the Sykes-Picot agreement, which was named after the two diplomats who carved up the map. The Gulf States have some alignment within OPEC, except for Yemen, but also have their individual disagreements.

After World War II, when Britain and France were busy trying to rebuild their own countries, they began to withdraw from their overseas colonies. As the region continued to be unstable, the U.S. became involved, mainly to ensure the free flow of oil and the security of shipping routes. This is where the roots of the current dispute with Iran began. Today, as a major oil producer and with tentacles and proxy groups in every quadrant, Iran has set its sights on regional dominance. The next installment of *The Wider World* will explore the historical context of Iran's role in the region.

The main question for today is: "Who are the Houthis, and why are they attacking us?"

The Houthis are a violent militia group called Ansar Allah (Partisans for God) in Arabic, who claim to be protecting Yemen's Shia religious minority, the Zaidis. They claim to be part of the Iranian-led movement hostile to the U.S. and the West in general, as well as Israel, comprising the self-named "axis of resistance." The Houthi name comes from their founder, Hussein al-Houthi. The current leader is his brother, Abdul Malik al-Houthi.^[vi]

Until 1978, Yemen was divided into two nations: North and South Yemen. Ali Abdullah Saleh had been vice president of North Yemen and became president of the united Yemen following a peace agreement in 1990. The group formed in the 1990s in Yemen but became better known for carrying on a civil war since 2012, when they ousted Saleh from power. It was a move largely seen by outsiders as part of the misnamed Arab Spring.

Saleh still maintained influence in the ensuing civil war and was eventually assassinated by Houthi gunmen in 2017, largely due to his siding with Western powers in the Global War on Terror, as well as for his alliance with Saudi Arabia against the Houthis. During the war on terror, Saleh was adept at convincing the U.S. that he was fighting terrorists, rather than opposition groups, and obtaining resources he used to maintain his position and lifestyle. Saleh was succeeded by his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, who was also ousted by the Houthis in 2015, after they took control of large parts of the country and the capital city of Saana.

This was alarming to Saudi Arabia, as Yemen is considered the heel of the blade of the Persian Gulf's "ice skate." It is located along the southern border of Saudi Arabia, along with Oman, which forms the rest of the "blade," as shown on the map.[v]

Thus, the civil war in Yemen is often described as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia became involved in 2015 after the ousting of Hadi, seeing the Yemeni government in disarray.



Map of the Persian Gulf

Saudi Arabia had been using American-made weapons to strike Yemen, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in this, one of the poorest countries in the world. Thus, U.S. domestic calls for an end to this support led Saudi Arabia and Iran to normalize relations in 2023, bringing hopes for a permanent end to the fighting.

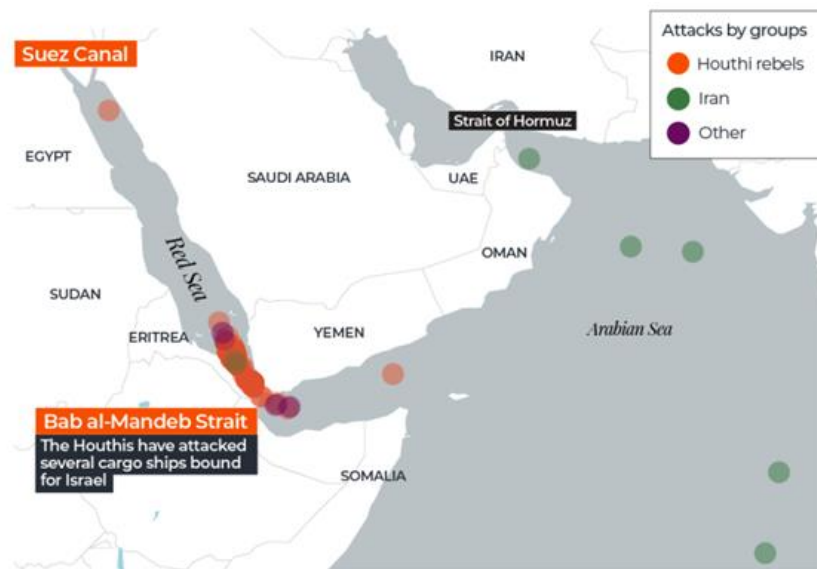
However, since the Hamas attack on Israel and the ensuing war, the Houthis have manifested their support of the Palestinians by attacking ships in the Red Sea that they claim have links to Israel or are bringing supplies to Israel, as shown on the second map.^[vi] They recently seized the Galaxy Star cargo ship and have turned it into a tourist attraction.^[vii] They also claim that while they receive aid from Iran, they have their own objectives and are not operating under Iranian direction.^[viii]



Yemenis pose for selfies on the Galaxy Star

Why would the Houthis attack U.S. troops stationed in the region as well as threaten international shipping in the Red Sea? The actions greatly increased recruitment and allowed the Houthis to be viewed as the legitimate government in Yemen, ultimately enhancing their negotiating power in any peace process.

In 2023, the United Nations named Yemen the world's most significant humanitarian crisis with nearly 22 million people (nearly two-thirds of its population) at risk of food insecurity and disease. Ending the fighting sooner rather than later can give the Houthis a stronger bargaining position if they make the case they want to end the crisis and have a role in governing, rather than destroying the country.



Recent attacks in the Red Sea

The U.S. and the U.K. have responded by assembling a 22-nation international coalition, codenamed *Operation Prosperity Guardian*, to keep the shipping lanes open and tighten security on U.S. bases in the region.^[ix] Two Navy Seals were killed on Jan. 11 as they tried to seize a ship allegedly carrying munitions bound for Yemen.^[x] In addition, the U.S. has been bombing Houthi positions in Yemen, while saying it does not want to be dragged into a wider regional war.

At the same time, Iran orchestrated strikes on what it claimed was an Israeli intelligence cell in Iraq’s Kurdish-held area of Irbil. Israel denied that such an intelligence cell existed in Iraq. Since the end of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, that country is now allied with Iran, although, 2,500 U.S. troops are still stationed in Iraq, as part of the “mopping up” operation to end Islamic State activity in the region.

Tensions escalated even more when three American service personnel were killed and more than 40 wounded in a drone strike in Jordan on Jan. 28. They were part of a small outpost of about 350 U.S. personnel formed as a logistical base for 900 U.S. troops dealing with the Islamic State in Syria. Jordan is a close American ally, but did not want to advertise this U.S. presence, as it tries to keep good relations with its neighbors and stay out of regional conflicts.

The one-way attack drone was able to elude U.S. aerial security systems as it was likely assumed to be a “friendly” returning from a surveillance mission. The U.S. has stated that it was launched by Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah militants in the region, which, according to the U.S. Directorate of National Intelligence (DNI) was founded in 2007 with the aim of “establishing an Iran-aligned government

in Iraq, expel U.S. and coalition forces from the country, and advance Iranian interests throughout the Middle East.”^[xi] It was designated a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State in 2009 and in 2022 was estimated to have about 10,000 members, but this may have grown since the Hamas attack on Oct. 7. Israel’s response has galvanized disparate groups into a single-minded anti-Western, anti-Israeli, increasingly unified force with the backing of Iran.

A direct attack on U.S. personnel and the resulting deaths required determined retaliation and has thus far resulted in a drone attack in Baghdad on Feb. 8 that KH has acknowledged killed senior leader Abu Baqir Al-Saadi, a senior leader, along with two other people who were escorting him. Although there have been no reports of collateral damage, Iraq has lodged a complaint against this apparent breach of its sovereignty, as operational security required no advance warning or request to the Iraqi government.

This is likely the opening salvo of a series of such attacks. Now that the U.S. has mostly extricated itself from large-scale operations in the Middle East, the administration of President Joe Biden and most of the Defense establishment has no appetite for a direct, full-scale war against Iran at this point. Iran’s military forces today are far better trained and equipped than Iraq’s forces were in 2003, and they are assisted by several regional militia groups that it supports to make it an untenable option.

In addition, Israel and Hezbollah, an Iranian-supported pro-Palestinian militant group based in Lebanon, have been trading airstrikes, causing many observers to fear an even greater escalation of the Hamas-Israel war. Not to make this any less confusing, on Jan. 16, Iran launched a missile and drone attack in Pakistani territory, claiming it was targeting *Jaish al-Adl*, an Iranian Sunni Muslim militant group that has conducted attacks inside Iran.^[xii]

Hopes that the war in Palestine would not spread were faint from the beginning, but in this dangerous neighborhood, the latest escalations are unlikely to be the last. Each player has its own motivations, but for Iran, it is total regional hegemony. As former Defense Secretary James Mattis warned in a Department of Defense briefing in December 2017, “Everywhere you find turmoil [in the Middle East], you find Iran’s hand in it.”^[xiii]

[i] “The latest on the Israel-Hamas war,” *CNN*, February 8, 2024, available [here](#), accessed on February 8, 2024

In addition, *Reuters* has reported that while these numbers come from the Hamas-controlled Ministry of Health: The United Nations and other international institutions and experts, as well as Palestinian authorities in the West Bank — rivals of Hamas — say the Gaza ministry has long made a good-faith effort to account for the dead under the most difficult conditions. “The numbers may not be perfectly accurate on a minute-to-minute basis,” said Michael Ryan, of the World Health Organization’s Health Emergencies Program. “But they largely reflect the level of death and injury.” In previous wars, the ministry’s counts

have held up to U.N. scrutiny, independent investigations and even Israel's tallies. "What is Gaza's Ministry of Health and How Does it Calculate the War's Death Toll," *AP*, November 6, 2023, available [here](#), accessed on February 8, 2024

[ii] "More than 500,000 people in Gaza face 'catastrophic hunger' UNRWA," *ABC News*, January 24, 2024, available [here](#), accessed on February 8, 2024

[iii] Middle East Map, *Library of Congress*, available [here](#), accessed on January 22, 2024

[iv] "Who are the Houthis and why are they attacking Red Sea ships?" *BBC*, February 5, 2024, available [here](#), accessed on February 8, 2024

[v] Map of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, *Wikimedia Commons*, available [here](#), accessed on February 8, 2024

[vi] "Who are the Houthis? A simple guide to the Yemeni group," *Al Jazeera*, January 12, 2024 available [here](#), accessed on January 22, 2024

[vii] Photo from "Houthi-captured ship becomes tourist attraction for Yemenis," *The National News NGulf*, December 12, 2023, available [here](#), accessed on February 8, 2024

[viii] For military junkies, this *Reuters* report has an impressive set of graphics showing how drones are launched, what kinds and how many ships have been attacked using what weapons, numbers of attempted and successful attacks and by whom, as well as aerial footage of damage, available [here](#), accessed on February 8, 2024

[ix] "Statement from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea," *U.S. Department of Defense Press Release*, December 18, 2023, available [here](#), accessed on February 8, 2024

[x] "CENTCOM Status Update on Missing U.S. Navy Seals," *U.S. Central Command X account*, January 21, 2024, available [here](#), accessed on January 22, 2024

[xi] Counter Terrorism Guide: Kata'ib Hizballah (KH)," *DNI*, last update September 2022, available [here](#), accessed on February 8, 2024

[xii] Understanding a week of missile strikes across Middle East," *BBC*, January 21, 2024 available [here](#), accessed on January 22, 2024

[xiii] Mattis: Iran Working to Destabilize Middle East, *DOD News*, December 16, 2017 available [here](#), accessed on January 22, 2024

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