

Advisory Panel on the Question of the Red Sea

The Red Sea Political Crisis



Forum	Advisory Panel on the Question of the Red Sea
Issue:	The Red Sea Political Crisis
Student Officer:	Hidde van der Ligt
Position:	President

Introduction

The Red Sea's geopolitical landscape is influenced by various factors, including historical rivalries, economic ambitions, and strategic military considerations. The presence of key maritime chokepoints such as the Suez Canal and the Bab El-Mandeb strait underscores the region's importance, attracting the attention and involvement of major global and regional powers. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United States, and China, alongside local states like Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, and Djibouti, play pivotal roles in shaping the region's dynamics.

Recent years have seen a marked escalation in political tensions and conflict in the Red Sea region, particularly with the protracted crisis in Yemen. The involvement of various actors, including the Houthi rebels supported by Iran and the Saudi-led coalition, has exacerbated the humanitarian disaster, leading to widespread suffering and instability. The United Nations-brokered truce in April 2022 provided temporary relief but failed to deliver lasting peace, as hostilities resumed in several areas, further complicating the situation.

Definition of Key Terms

Ashura

A significant religious observance in Shia Islam commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala. It is marked by mourning rituals and processions.



Eid al-Ghadir

A Shia Muslim festival celebrating the appointment of Imam Ali as the successor to Prophet Muhammad at the historic event of Ghadir Khumm. It is considered significant in Twelver Shia Islam.

Maritime Chokepoints

Narrow waterways, such as straits or channels, that are crucial for maritime navigation due to their geographic location and potential control over shipping lanes. Examples include the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Bab el-Mandeb strait.

Power Vacuum

A situation where there is no clear authority or leadership, often occurring after a regime change, collapse of government control, or during transitional periods. It creates opportunities for various factions or external powers to assert influence.

Proxy

In geopolitical terms, a proxy refers to a group, organization, or state that acts on behalf of another more powerful entity, typically to further the interests of the latter without direct involvement in conflict.

Public Commemoration

Refers to collective rituals or ceremonies held publicly to remember or celebrate important historical or religious events. It often involves mass participation and may include religious or cultural elements.

Salafist Preachers

Preachers who adhere to Salafism, a conservative Sunni Islamic movement advocating a return to the practices of the early Islamic period (Salaf), rejecting modern interpretations and innovations.

Shia

Shia Islam, also known as Shi'ism, is one of the two main branches of Islam, the other being Sunni Islam. Shiites (adherents of Shia Islam) constitute a significant minority within the global Muslim population. The primary theological difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims centers around the



question of leadership and authority in the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

Sunni

One of the two main branches of Islam, characterized by adherence to the Sunnah (traditions and practices) of the Prophet Muhammad. Sunni Islam is the largest denomination of Islam worldwide.

Twelver Shiite

The largest branch of Shia Islam, which believes in a line of twelve Imams (spiritual leaders), starting with Imam Ali and ending with Imam al-Mahdi, who is believed to be in occultation and will return as a savior.

Zaydi

A branch of Shia Islam predominantly found in Yemen, characterized by adherence to the Zaydi school of jurisprudence and traditions. Zaydis historically ruled parts of Yemen and are distinct from Twelver Shiites in certain theological and legal doctrines

Zaydi Traditions

Refers to the religious and cultural practices associated with Zaydi Shia Islam, including rituals, legal interpretations, and historical narratives specific to the Zaydi community, particularly in Yemen.

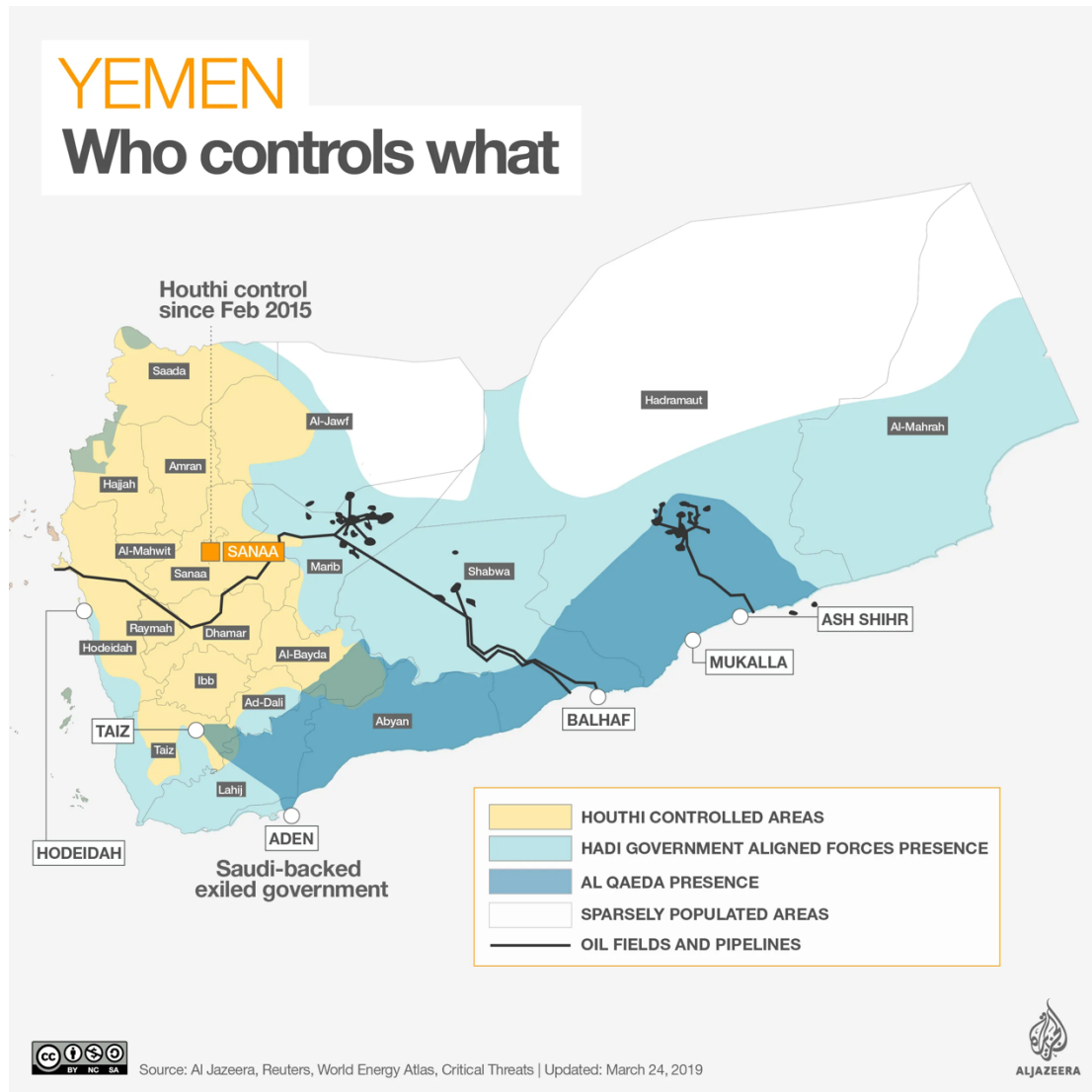
General Overview

Ansar Allah

The Houthi movement, officially known as Ansar Allah, emerged from Yemen's northwestern Saada province. Practicing the Zaydi form of Shiism, the Houthis represent a significant faction within Yemen, although they make up only about 35% of the population. Historically, the Zaydis ruled Yemen for a thousand years until the overthrow of the Zaydi imamate in 1962. The loss of political power led to persistent efforts by the Zaydis to regain their influence in Yemen.



In the 1980s, the Houthi clan initiated a revival of Zaydi traditions in response to the threat posed by state-funded Salafist preachers. This movement gradually evolved into a broader insurgency against Yemen's central government. Since 2004, the Houthis have been engaged in a protracted conflict with Yemen's Sunni-majority government, and their insurgency has expanded beyond its Zaydi roots, incorporating various Sunni political allies and nationalist rhetoric.



The Houthis gained significant territorial control in September 2014 when they seized the Yemeni capital, Sanaa. By 2016, they had taken control of much of northern Yemen. The Houthi movement's rise to power was facilitated by the instability and power vacuum that followed President Ali Abdullah Saleh's ceding of power to his deputy, Abd Rabbuh Mansour al-Hadi, in November 2011. The Houthis capitalized on Hadi's lack of popular support, consolidating their power and eventually rejecting an UN-brokered peace deal that required them to withdraw from Sanaa.



Accusations of Iranian support for the Houthis have been a consistent element of the conflict. Yemeni officials and Sunni states, including Saudi Arabia, have alleged that Iran and its proxy Hezbollah have provided arms, training, and financial support to the Houthis. Although Iranian and Hezbollah officials have denied these claims, the United States, in coordination with Saudi Arabia, has presented physical evidence of Iranian arms transfers to the group. The Houthis' relationship with Iran has led to an increase in Twelver Shiite influence within the movement, including the adoption of practices such as the public commemoration of Ashura and the observance of Eid al-Ghadir.

The Current Ongoing Political Red Sea Crisis



On October 19, 2023, the Houthi movement in Yemen, supported by Iran according to physical evidence presented by the United States in coordination with Saudi Arabia, launched missiles and armed drones at Israel, demanding an end to the invasion of the Gaza Strip. This marked the beginning of the current ongoing Red Sea crisis. The Houthis then proceeded to seize and attack numerous navy and commercial vessels in the Red Sea, which was the start of a series of escalations. The United States and its allied forces have launched hundreds of airstrikes against missile facilities and other targets in response to these acts.



The ongoing Yemeni crisis, the Israel-Hamas war, the Iran-Israel proxy fight, and the Iran-United States proxy struggle are all closely related to the current issue. Since 2014, a sizable chunk of Yemen's territory around the Red Sea has been under the authority of the Houthi movement, which is opposed to the country's internationally recognized government. Their occupation of a key position has given them control over maritime operations in the area.

Soon after the Israel-Hamas conflict broke out, the Houthis, who were allied with Hamas, started firing drones and missiles against Israel. Houthi rebels have not only targeted Israeli commerce vessels in the Red Sea, but have also attacked ships from other nations, especially in the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, which is the southern nautical entrance to the Suez Canal. Because so much of the world's maritime traffic passes through this straight, it is a vital chokepoint for the global economy.

The Houthis are determined to keep up their attacks until Israel ceases to deploy force in fighting Hamas. They have said that they view as acceptable targets any vessel connected to Israel, including American and British vessels. However, they frequently target ships from other countries with their indiscriminate strikes. In the Red Sea, the Houthis targeted almost sixty vessels between October 2023 and March 2024. As a result, hundreds of commercial ships have been diverted to avoid these hazardous waters by circling South Africa.

A large military reaction has been launched by a coalition of nations in response to these hostile acts. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 2722 in January 2024, denouncing the Houthi attacks and highlighting the value of freedom of navigation. In response to this resolution, the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian was initiated with the goal of defending shipping lanes in the Red Sea.

While other nations have separately patrolled the waters close to Yemen, targeting Houthi vessels in the Red Sea, the United States and the United Kingdom have been at the forefront of coalition air and missile operations against Houthi targets since January 12, 2024. The Houthis have not wavered in the face of these military counterattacks. In May 2024, Brigadier General Yahya Saree warned that his forces would target any ships that were traveling to Israeli ports in the Mediterranean Sea, expanding their threat beyond the Red Sea.



Major Parties Involved

Houthi Movement

The Houthi movement, originating from Yemen's Zaydi Shia community in the north, aims to control Yemeni territory and challenge the legitimacy of the internationally recognized Yemeni government. They employ military campaigns, including drone and missile attacks, against government forces and have seized significant territory since 2014.

Yemeni Government

Led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, the internationally recognized Yemeni government receives support from Saudi Arabia and a coalition of Arab states. Its objectives include restoring government control over Yemen, combating the Houthi insurgency, and stabilizing the country politically and economically.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia leads a coalition of Arab countries supporting the Yemeni government against the Houthis. Its interests include countering Iranian influence in Yemen, securing its southern border, and maintaining regional stability. Saudi Arabia conducts airstrikes against Houthi targets and provides military and financial aid to Yemeni government forces.

Iran

Iran is accused of providing military training, financial support, and weapons to the Houthis, aiming to increase its regional influence and counter Saudi Arabia's dominance. While Iran denies direct involvement, it supports the Houthis politically and militarily against actions by the Saudi-led coalition according to physical evidence, provided by the United States in coordination with Saudi Arabia, of Iranian arms transfers to the group.

USA

The United States provides intelligence, logistical support, and sells arms to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in support of Yemeni government forces. Its interests include ensuring regional stability, combating terrorism, and securing maritime trade routes such as the Bab El-Mandeb strait. The US also conducts drone strikes against terrorist targets in Yemen.



AQAP

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is a key extremist group operating in Yemen, formed in 2009. Exploiting the chaos of the Yemeni civil war, AQAP has expanded its influence, particularly in southern Yemen. Opposing both the Houthis and the Yemeni government, AQAP presents itself as a defender of Sunni Islam against Shia influence. Despite facing U.S. drone strikes and Saudi-led coalition efforts, AQAP remains a significant force in the region's instability.

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

As a part of the Saudi-led coalition, the UAE aims to counter Islamist groups like AQAP in Yemen and secure influence in southern Yemen by supporting local militias and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). It conducts military operations against AQAP and provides humanitarian aid.

United Nations

The UN mediates peace talks, coordinates humanitarian aid efforts, and monitors ceasefire agreements in Yemen. It implements Security Council resolutions aimed at ending the conflict, supports humanitarian agencies providing aid to civilians, and advocates for political dialogue among the warring parties.

Israel

Israel faces security threats from groups allied with Iran, such as the Houthi movement, Hezbollah and Hamas, culminating in the missile and drone attack by the Houthi movement. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has affected its relationships with neighbouring states and international actors.

China

China has growing economic interests in the Red Sea region, particularly in terms of maritime trade through key chokepoints like the Suez Canal and the Bab El-Mandeb strait. It pursues economic partnerships and investments in various countries along the Red Sea coast.



Egypt

Egypt plays a strategic role in the Red Sea region due to its control over the Suez Canal and its historical influence in regional geopolitics. It maintains relations with various Gulf states and other regional powers, impacting its stance on the Yemen conflict and broader regional stability.

Sudan

Sudan's proximity to the Red Sea and its recent political changes influences its role in regional geopolitics. It has historical ties with Saudi Arabia and has participated in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, while also navigating its internal political dynamics.

Djibouti

Djibouti's strategic location near the Bab el-Mandeb strait makes it crucial for maritime trade and military operations in the Red Sea region. It hosts military bases for several international powers, including the US, China, and France, contributing to its geopolitical significance.

Timeline of Key Events

1962	Overthrow of the Zaydi imamate in Yemen, leading to persistent efforts by the Zaydis to regain political influence.
1980s	Houthi clan initiates revival of Zaydi traditions in response to state-funded Salafist preachers.
September 10th, 2004	Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, a Houthi leader, killed by Yemeni forces, marking the beginning of the Houthi insurgency.
February 27 th , 2012.	President Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation in 2011 and transfer of power to Abd Rabbuh Mansour al-Hadi marked a critical shift in Yemen's leadership. Saleh's departure left a power vacuum, and al-Hadi's weak government struggled to maintain control. This instability



	allowed the Houthis to gain power, ultimately leading to their takeover of Sanaa and escalation of the conflict.
September 21 st , 2014.	Houthis seize the Yemeni capital, Sanaa.
January 22 nd , 2015.	Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi resigns under Houthi pressure; later flees to Aden.
March 26 th , 2015.	Saudi-led coalition launches military intervention in Yemen against the Houthis.
April 2 nd , 2022.	UN-brokered truce in Yemen provides temporary relief but fails to deliver lasting peace.
October 19 th , 2023.	Houthis launch missiles and drones at Israel, demanding an end to the invasion of the Gaza Strip.
November 19 th , 2023.	The first (of later many) commercial ships were attacked in international waters in the southern Red Sea, with anti-ship ballistic missiles fired from Yemen by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.
December 19 th , 2023.	US Defense Secretary announced that the US had formed a coalition of ten nations who would send ships to assist in fighting against Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. The coalition quickly expanded.
January 10 th , 2024.	UN Security Council passes Resolution 2722, condemning Houthi attacks and emphasizing freedom of navigation.



UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Renewal of sanctions against Yemen imposed by the Security Council, February 25th 2021 (S/RES/2564)
- Condemning Houthi attacks and emphasizing freedom of navigation, January 10th 2024 (S/RES/2722)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

One significant attempt to resolve the crisis was the Stockholm Agreement in December 2018, reached between the Yemeni government and Houthi rebels. This agreement included a ceasefire in Hudaydah, a vital port for humanitarian aid and trade, and provisions for the redeployment of forces. While the Stockholm Agreement initially brought some hope for peace and allowed limited humanitarian access, it was undermined by repeated violations of the ceasefire by both sides and a pervasive lack of trust. This led to only partial implementation, thereby limiting its overall success.

The Stockholm Agreement and various UN resolutions have demonstrated that diplomatic efforts can yield some positive results, such as temporary ceasefires and humanitarian access. However, their success has been limited by violations and non-compliance by the warring parties. Humanitarian initiatives have provided essential relief but have been hindered by logistical and security challenges.



Possible Solutions

A first possible solution involves establishing a robust and permanent multinational maritime security coalition to patrol the Red Sea. This coalition would aim to ensure the protection of both commercial and military vessels navigating these critical waters. The coalition would be formed under the United Nations, ensuring an inclusive and globally recognized command structure. Key players in this coalition would include naval forces from the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other nations with vested interests in the stability of the Red Sea region.

A second solution focuses on a comprehensive diplomatic and economic engagement strategy aimed at addressing the underlying causes of the conflict in Yemen and the broader Red Sea region. This approach would involve intensified diplomatic efforts led by the United Nations and supported by major international stakeholders to facilitate a durable peace agreement between the warring parties in Yemen. The peace process would emphasize inclusivity, ensuring that all significant factions, including the Houthi movement, are represented and their concerns addressed.

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