



Houthis have a lot to gain, little to lose from their maritime operations

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On Feb. 24, the U.S. Central Command announced that it had conducted, alongside the United Kingdom, another round of strikes on Yemen's Houthis, a small, Iranian-backed rebel group that commanded little international attention until it began a series of unnerving attacks on maritime shipping in mid-October. The operation hit 18 targets, including Houthi underground weapons storage sites, missile storage sites, one-way attack drones, air defense systems, radars and a helicopter.

So who are the Houthis, precisely? While many people have focused on Tehran's ties to the Yemeni rebels, the group is not merely another Iranian proxy.

A Zaydi Shiite movement that emerged in the 1990s as a reaction to rising Saudi influence in Yemen, the Houthis were considered a largely local issue until they began to gain momentum during the Arab Spring and eventually took control of the capital, Sanaa, and the northwest of the country.

While the rebels received some nominal support from Iran beginning around 2009, it wasn't until the Saudi-led military coalition invaded Yemen in March 2015 to confront the Houthis that Iran really began to ramp up its sponsorship. Since then, the Iranian regime has provided the group with military advice, training and small arms, as well as both advanced weapons and the components needed to build such systems in Yemen.

But don't be fooled. While reports indicate that both Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah commanders are in Yemen directing and overseeing Houthi maritime operations, there is no guarantee that Tehran could stop the group's aggression in the Red Sea even if it wanted to. For although the Houthis have relied on Iran's support for more than a decade, they are far from a totally owned subsidiary of Iran, and they still act autonomously. Take, for instance, cross-border attacks against the United Arab Emirates that were carried out in January 2022 despite a recent rapprochement between Iran and the UAE.

In fact, the Houthis have a lot to gain and little to lose from their maritime operations, which they have depicted as a response to the ongoing Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip.

For the Houthis, playing a role in the Israel-Hamas war is an opportunity to bolster their popularity and recruit new forces into their ranks. And so far, it's working. The vast majority of Yemenis are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, and thousands of them have gathered in Houthi-controlled Sanaa to show their support for Palestinians and protest Western attacks on Yemen, with some even criticizing the Biden administration's decision to redesignate the group as a terrorist organization. Moreover, Houthi leaders say they have recruited and trained 200,000 new fighters since they began their maritime offensive.