FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 22.02.2024 | Ahmed Al Maqtari

Driven by God (amongst other things)

As a demonstration of solidarity with Gaza, the Houthis have escalated the situation in the Red Sea. But what does the group actually hope to achieve?

Over the past seven years, the Houthis, a militia in control of northern Yemen, have consistently preached a political slogan comprising the phrases 'Allah is the greatest', 'death to America' and 'curse the Jews'. Similar to the versions used by Iran and Hezbollah, this political slogan has become an important cultural practice used to mark territory and celebrate military achievements or events. Remarkably, the slogan is ubiquitous at weddings, funerals and even in schools, and is casually displayed in public spaces to demarcate Houthi-controlled areas in the north.

Following the 2011 Arab Spring, the Houthis experienced rapid growth in Yemen. Starting as peaceful demonstrators, they eventually transformed into a widespread armed insurgency, triggering a multi-billion-dollar regional conflict. Arming their factions involved in the Yemeni Revolution, they engaged in skirmishes with government forces alongside their allies at the time, the Muslim Brotherhood (Islah Party). After the signing of the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA), the Houthis launched an all-out war against the surrounding governorates. Exploiting the situation to retaliate against his own removal from power, ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh utilised the militia to eliminate his political adversaries. In 2014, the Houthis overthrew the internationally recognised government in the capital Sana'a, which led to a famine. In response to the Houthi's growing power, a Saudi Arabian-led coalition launched a bombing campaign in 2015, resulting in the deaths of over 370 000 people, including 11 000 children.

A change in policy

As a demonstration of solidarity with Gaza, the Houthis have escalated the situation in the Red Sea, intensifying their disruption of maritime trade by, initially, targeting ships associated with Israelis or suspected of heading to Israel. The Houthis have since expanded their attacks to

include various unrelated ships, deploying cruise missiles, drones and anti-ship ballistic missiles in strategic waterways like the southern Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb Strait, Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea.

Surprisingly, the threat to trade routes had so far been minimally employed by the Houthi regime, even amid difficulties imposed by the Saudi siege, which has limited the group's access to arms and oil revenue and caused an acute shortage in food and medicine. Constant hostility, as well as calls by humanitarian organisations, even pressured the group to initially demilitarise the coast. As a result, the Houthis had been particularly focused on managing the local conflict in the port city of Hodeida, their sole access point to the rest of the world, rather than policing the international trade route. Still, their latest attacks are not completely unprecedented. In fact, the Houthis have attacked oil tankers and detained ships earlier in the conflict. Those attacks have led to increased hostility along the Red Sea's coastline, prompting violent fights over the management of the port.

Their current activities still present a substantial shift from their previous policy. It appears that the situation in Gaza revealed the Houthis' growing military capability, political clarity, as well as reach and military readiness to escalate and expand operations to a wider political crowd. It is now evident that the Houthis have the upper hand in a complex civil war, influencing the destiny, trajectory and political utilisation of the coastline. But why the sudden increase in hostility?

By redirecting attention towards the conflict in Gaza, the Houthis seek to cultivate a considerable base of international support, portraying themselves as advocates for a noble and justifiable cause.

First, much like Iran, the Houthis have cultivated an image around the Arab-Israeli conflict. The inclusion of 'curse the Jews' in their slogan not only articulates their perception of Israel but also reflects their aspiration to act as a representative of Arab aspirations to reclaim a pre-1948 Palestine. On the other hand, the Houthis' most realistic and crucial gain lies in negotiating the security of the international trade route as part of a larger deal to end the war in Yemen.

Second, the Houthis comprehend the public Arab sentiment towards Israel, especially how citizens perceive their governments — as neglecting Palestinian pain and suffering. This presents an opportunity to win undecided public opinion both within and outside Yemeni borders, especially as global support for addressing the conflict in Gaza gains substantial momentum as a humanitarian concern.

Third, the Houthis refrained from pursuing a diplomatic approach, either due to perceived illegitimacy or with the aim of securing a larger deal with international security bodies regarding their war with Saudi Arabia. Opting for direct military engagement draws more attention to a potential future Houthi role in broader Arab-Israeli politics — especially when the security of an important international trade route is on the table. Additionally, it provides the group with an opportunity to further obscure their involvement in the Yemeni civil war and diminish their own history of humanitarian and war-related offenses. By redirecting attention towards the conflict in Gaza, they seek to cultivate a considerable base of international support, portraying themselves as advocates for a noble and justifiable cause. The implications for Yemen could range from an increased militarisation of the Red Sea to direct military engagement. Consequently, the United States and its allies see an incentive to increase military presence and assert their right to respond in the poorest country in the Arabian Peninsula — potentially bypassing previous humanitarian concerns.

The United States' response

For a long time, the US Congress had mixed emotions on matters like resupplying the Saudi arsenal and negotiating controversial multi-billion-dollar arms deals. However, the current circumstances suggest a shift, with such deals potentially becoming easier to finalise. A potential confrontation with the Houthis may extend beyond airstrikes, marking a departure from the previous stance where the US refrained from direct military engagement alongside Saudi Arabia and solely provided logistical support. The Biden administration actually went as far as reversing the Trump-era designation of Houthis on the global terrorists list only to reinstate it later, citing humanitarian concerns and the attacks on commercial ships, respectively. Although the US has a long history of covert operations and drone strikes in Yemen, they were focused on terrorism, primarily targeting Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The current designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organisation may well prompt US lawmakers to push for greater military weight in the region.

The Houthi rebels have expressed dissatisfaction over their obvious affiliation with Iran, considering it detrimental

Direct military actions by the United States and its allies against the Houthis risk deepening regional divisions, particularly given the Houthis' perceived ties to Iran. This shift from counterterrorism to wider involvement in Yemen's conflict might lead to a re-evaluation of regional alliances, potentially further

to identifying their local and regional objectives.

destabilising the already fragile Middle East. Additionally, the increased tensions in the Red Sea raise concerns about potential economic fallouts. Disruptions to the trade routes could have a domino effect on international trade and energy markets, creating economic uncertainties on a global scale.

Recent joint strikes by the US and the UK in Yemen mark a dangerous development that the Biden Administration has employed to demonstrate its commitment to support Israel. However, The Houthis have a history of framing such attacks to solidify their role as 'protectors of Islamic and Arab interests against Israeli and US aggressions.' This places the US in a direct line of fire with yet another Iranian proxy.

The Houthi rebels have received considerable backing from Iran, including Unmanned Aerial Vehicle supplies (UAVs) and tactical long-range projectile technology. Their shared anti-Saudi sentiment and religious commonalities further solidify their alliance. However, the Houthi rebels have expressed dissatisfaction over their obvious affiliation, considering it detrimental to identifying their local and regional objectives.

Impacts on civilians

Financially, the damage of the recent conflict escalation seeps into the already crumbling Yemeni economy. Since the beginning of the insurgency, Yemen's unity appeared integral in the preservation of its frail economy. The effect of separation had the north and south disputing over assets and financial institutions, which they had to either relocate to the new capital or manage under Houthi authority.

The Houthis have systematically profited from the private sector by moving currency, energy and oil black markets. Yemen's currency, the Rial, sustained the greatest damage. Prices of goods have risen to intolerable levels and living in Sana'a means devastating spikes in debts and living expenses. There is an ongoing humanitarian famine that presents itself in the lowest income communities, meaning that rural and suburban areas are hit the hardest. Urban regions have largely depended on the group to sustain their livelihoods, including enlisting for basic regime financed compensation and social benefits.

The Houthis' unwavering conviction that God is on

Yemeni public funds have taken the largest blow as they are used to sustain a network of tribal loyalties and manufacture weapons and

their side has not only fuelled their relentless escalation but also embedded their political slogan deep within the cultural fabric of northern Yemen.

drones. The militia have used further tactics like withholding public salaries, as well as shaking down stakeholders, confiscating assets and manipulating energy prices to generate income. Some factions, including political affiliates, have taken it to their own hands and attempted civil action. The Houthis, for that purpose, have developed a rather successful strategy of protest suppression and deflecting accusations towards the West, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition and Israel. The accusations vary between withholding deserved reparations and causing a manmade famine by imposing an illegitimate siege.

The Houthis' unwavering conviction that God is on their side has not only fuelled their relentless escalation but also embedded their political slogan deep within the cultural fabric of northern Yemen. This potent mix of religious fervour and political messaging, prominently displayed at various events, serves as a tangible manifestation of their rise and control over the region. As considerations on further actions unfold, it is crucial to recognise the enduring nature of their beliefs and the complexities of their strategies. Especially, since the alleged Saudi six-month intervention is nearing its 10-year mark. Acknowledging the deep-seated motivations that drive the Houthis, particularly their calculated support for the Palestinians to increase their power in the region, underscores the necessity for nuanced diplomatic approaches.



Ahmed Al Maqtari
Frankfurt am Main

Ahmed Al Maqtari is working on the Africa Project at the Goethe University of Frankfurt.