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Navigating Iranian Influence: Perspectives on Houthi Rebel Aggression in the Red Sea

The Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen

For several weeks, Houthi forces in Yemen have been initiating missiles and drone attacks targeting vessels in the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a 20-mile wide channel that splits Eritrea and Djibouti on the African side and Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula. With more than 100 assaults on 12 diverse commercial and merchant vessels, it is safe to say that the situation is alarming (CNN, US and allies scramble to respond to Houthi attacks on key Red Sea shipping lanes). What formerly was a routine maritime route for ships has evolved into an international crisis, compelling multiple shipping lines to divert from this region. Iran supports the Shiite minority group in Yemen, providing them with funds and equipment to pursue their missions within the country. The domestic conflict in Yemen has persisted for numerous years. Since the previous government was overthrown, the Houthis have ruled since late 2014 in “government position” (Arab Center, Timeline of the Yemen Crisis, from the 1990s to the Present). In 2015, a Saudi led coalition, together with Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan, initiated Operation Decisive Storm. The coalition launched air strikes targeting the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, an objective that eluded the coalition was the removal of the Houthis from power, which has not happened to date, in late 2023.

The Red sea and Bab el-Mandeb Strait

As numerous reports have highlighted the recurring attacks on different ships in the region, one might be curious of the reasons behind these incidents. The Houthi movement themselves said in a statement that its “naval operations” are being carried out due to their support to the Palestinian people. A spokesman mentioned in a social media post that the Houthis are not seeking violence towards international ships or “a show of force nor a challenge to anyone” although they assert their intention to target vessels potentially affiliated with Israel or the Western allies (CBS News, Why are the Houthis attacking ships in the Red Sea?).

The US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, presented on December 18, 2023, a military operation, jointly with a number of EU allies, for example Great Britain, Kanada and Bahrain. Their purpose is to "security challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, with the goal of ensuring freedom of navigation for all countries and bolstering regional security and prosperity." The Minister of Defense believes that the goal of the alliance is to monitor and militarily contribute to the sea passages, that are constantly occurring and additionally to addressing multiple attacks perpetrated by the Houthi rebels. While Austin presented the new alliance and establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian, Mohammed Abdul-Salam, the Houthis' chief negotiator and spokesman, directly contradicted the statements of the U.S. Secretary of Defense and stated that the Houthi rebels would persist targeting Israel-linked vessels off Yemen. The alliance objective is not solely to navigate vessels through the sea or bay but rather to function as a protective umbrella for as many vessels as possible (AP News, Pentagon announces new international mission to counter attacks on commercial vessels in Red Sea). The alliance, who will secure the movement on the water, consists of two parts, one part consists of intelligence work, while the other side consists of patrolling that will serve as the "shield" guarding against further drone and ballistic missiles. Mohammed Abdul-Salam also stated, even after the coalition's message, that their commitment would not change, regardless of the establishment of a maritime military force, as their dedication to the issue of Palestine is of paramount importance (Omni, Houthi rebels threaten more attacks on cargo ships). This kind of behavior by the Houthis indirectly harms and threatens individuals globally who are in need of humanitarian aid, fuel, food and other essential goods.

U.S. invitation to China

China's invitation has not been received in the way the Americans wished. Insights from a US diplomat could confirm that Beijing did not "dismiss" Washington. Incorporating Beijing, and China, would be an extraordinary winning element for this alliance committed to countering Houthi attacks. (Al Arabiya, US courts China to join anti-Houthi naval task force).

Considering the proximity in agreements between Tehran and Beijing, and the alignment of Iran with its support to the Houthis in Yemen, there could be potential repercussions in this situation. I am inclined to believe that Washington anticipated that statements from Beijing *possibly* could bring about a cessation of hostilities among the rebels in Yemen. China has recently been a key player in getting arch-rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia to re-establish

diplomatic relations, and attempted peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. Is this an outcome they could have achieved but are deliberately avoiding due to other political considerations, to for example avoid getting in a conflict with Iran?

Economical consequences

Over 12% of global shipping trade is transported through the Red Sea, and due to recent attacks on various commercial vessels, this has resulted in the world's top oil giants and shipping companies being frightened off. The relatively declining inflation seen recently is likely to increase once more due to the significant repercussions of the ongoing trade disruptions. Major shipping companies, including CMA CGM Group, MSC, Maersk, Hapag-Lloyd, and the British oil giant BP, have decided to end their operations in the Red Sea. John Stawpert, senior manager of environment and trade for the International Chamber of Shipping, said that 40% of the trade that passes through Europe and Asia normally passes through these waterways. Vessels opting for an alternative route would face the outcome of circumnavigating Africa to reach Europe, resulting in an estimated delay of 7-10 days, accompanied by additional fuel consumption and the need for extra ships (Euro News, New risk to inflation? Cost of the Red Sea attacks on global trade). Ships that utilize or traverse the Suez Canal, whether traveling to or from the Indian Ocean, must originate from the Red Sea or pass through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This occurs because the Suez Canal serves as the quickest sea route connecting Europe and Asia, particularly for the transportation of liquid natural gas and oil. In the first half of 2023, approximately nine million barrels of oil per day were shipped through the Suez Canal, according to Vortexa, a freight analytics firm. At S&P Global Market Intelligence, analysts claimed that roughly 15% of goods imported into North Africa, Europe and the Middle East are shipped from Asia and through the Gulf by Sea. Which included more than 13% crude oil and 21.5% refined oil (BBC News, What do Red Sea assaults mean for global trade?).

Conclusion and ending remarks

The Yemeni Houthi rebels, supported by Iran, have instigated more concern and chaos than anticipated globally. Their attacks on multiple vessels in the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb Strait prompted the establishment of a defensive coalition, as recently announced by the US Secretary of Defense. This development could potentially contribute to an upswing in inflation in 2024, a conclusion the world would prefer to avoid as 2023 comes to a close.

The rationale for China's hesitancy to join the defense coalition remains ambiguous. I continue to hold the view that under China's leadership, Beijing is unwilling to place itself between a defense alliance and Yemen, particularly considering Iran's substantial involvement and their relationship may potentially be at stake. In a conflict where China has enduring economic interests, the priority lies in maintaining high quality relations with Iran rather than aligning with the current defense alliance. The coming weeks will be decisive, if it escalates or de-escalate amidst the rebel bombings. Today, on Friday, December 22, a vote is expected to occur at the UN Security Council regarding humanitarian aid to Gaza. It is rumored that the United States will support this resolution, having vetoed the earlier vote. This Security Council resolution, combined with the defense alliance, could potentially bring about a temporary cessation or complete halt to ship firings, only time will reveal the outcome in the near future.

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