

# [***The Houthis Are Making History in the Most Dangerous Way***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BK8-RHY1-JBR6-93FS-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** "Maybe it's time for the West to assess the failed strategy adopted and led by the United States," a Yemeni expert told Newsweek.

**Body**

Prior to last November, the ability to disrupt global maritime trade was generally considered to be reserved for powers with a sizable, state-of-the-art arsenal of warships.

But one rebel group in Yemen with no fleet to speak of has managed to virtually commandeer one of the world's most crucial shipping lanes, seizing one cargo ship and firing near-daily barrages of missiles and drones at dozens of commercial vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden over the course of the past five months.

Today, Ansar Allah, commonly known as the Houthi movement, is looking to expand its unprecedented campaign deeper into the vast Indian Ocean, demanding that Israel end its war in the Gaza Strip. With leading shipping companies now forced to divert their vessels due to Ansar Allah operations, further disruptions may have serious implications not only for the global economy but also for the volatile geopolitical climate of a region already being pushed to the brink by ongoing conflicts and disputes.

The resulting situation is something of a paradigm shift for threats to maritime trade given the group's ideological aspirations and access to sophisticated weaponry.

The vast majority of risks to ships delivering goods across the globe have stemmed from natural or man-made disasters and non-state actors with limited economic motivations, such as pirates off the coast of Somalia. The threat posed by Ansar Allah, however, is "quite unusual," according to Ian Ralby, a leading maritime security expert who serves as CEO of the I.R. Consilium law firm.

"The problem," Ralby told *Newsweek*, "is that they are a bit different than everybody else who has attacked shipping."

**Victory Upon Victory**

Part of what sets Ansar Allah apart from other actors with the desire and capacity to attack commercial vessels is a consistent string of victories stemming back at least a decade in defiance of regional and world powers.

"They are demonstrating that they've had nothing but success," Ralby, who has testified before [*Congress*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/congress?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) on the Ansar Allah threat, said.

Long before Ansar Allah, whose name translates to "the Supporters of God," made headlines for paralyzing maritime traffic, the group shocked the world by seizing the Yemeni capital in early 2015 in the midst of the country's still-ongoing civil war. Sanaa remains under Ansar Allah's control to this day, despite the efforts of a Saudi-led, U.S.-backed campaign to restore the rule of the country's internationally recognized government.

Ansar Allah's roots date back even earlier, to the 1990s when religious and political leader Hussein al-Houthi began to mobilize followers to promote a revival of the Zaydi branch of Shiite Islam, to which the group—and about 40 percent of Yemen's population—adheres. Zaydi Shiites ruled much of Yemen for around 1,000 years prior to the 1962 military coup that established the modern republic in the north, followed five years later by a socialist victory against U.K. colonization in the south. The two rival states unified in 1990 under the leadership of North Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

As Ansar Allah became increasingly active in the 21st century, Houthi was killed in a clash with Yemeni security forces in 2004, leaving his brother, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi in charge. The group continued to grow [*in strength and popularity*](https://www.newsweek.com/photo-essay-rise-houthis-305511?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), seizing upon the Arab Spring movement of protests that ultimately deposed Saleh in 2012.

Not only would Ansar Allah go on to resist the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, but the group also managed to bring the fight to the neighboring kingdom itself by firing salvoes of missiles and drones that are alleged to have been supplied by Iran.

Today, with a United Nations-brokered ceasefire holding for nearly two years, Ansar Allah has recalibrated its armed forces in response to another war that erupted 1,000 miles away when the Palestinian [*Hamas*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/hamas?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) movement conducted a sweeping surprise attack against Israel last October. Ansar Allah has announced that its attacks on vessels would end if Israel ceased its unrelenting campaign to defeat Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

*Newsweek* has reached out to Ansar Allah for comment.

**A New Kind of Foe**

Ralby was skeptical that even an elusive resolution to the conflict in Gaza would stop Ansar Allah's maritime campaign at this point as "they have gained so much out of it."

He viewed the group's primary goals as being far beyond pressuring the international community to halt Israel's offensive against Hamas and considered their aims unique even among other Islamist groups that have claimed stunning victories in the past.

"They are not like the [*Taliban*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/taliban?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), they are not even like [*Al-Qaeda*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/al-qaeda?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)," Ralby said. "They are looking at the holy empire that ultimately has seats in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, but they are looking for global expansion."

"As far as the Houthis are concerned, they are not Yemenis," he added. "They are a movement that is borderless and so anything that allows them to expand is going to be seen as consistent with their general motivation and movement."

What the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does do for the group, however, is dissuade Arab countries from intervening, for fear of being viewed as indirectly supporting Israel. Currently, only one Arab nation, Bahrain, which hosts United States Navy Central Command's headquarters, has joined the Operation Prosperity Guardian coalition established by President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/joe-biden?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in December in response to Ansar Allah attacks.

Thus far, not even this coalition, nor several rounds of joint U.S.-U.K. airstrikes on Ansar Allah military sites in Yemen, have deterred the consistent spate of attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

"As far as the Houthis are concerned," Ralby said, "they're having the most successful period of their entire history right now."

**The Iranian Connection**

While Ansar Allah is, at its core, a Yemeni movement rooted in the country's internal sectarian ***politics***, the group has forged closed ties with Iran. The degree to which Tehran directly exerts influence over the group has been a matter of debate, but Ansar Allah proudly affirms its participation in a broader Iran-aligned "Axis of Resistance" that includes other powerful Shiite Muslim militias in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and [*elsewhere*](https://www.newsweek.com/iran-azerbaijan-ties-second-israel-1877780?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships).

In line with the brand established by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its expeditionary Quds Force, many of these groups bear a banner of a raised fist clenching a Kalashnikov-style assault rifle and a quote from the Quran. The logo of Ansar Allah does not follow this model, but simply conveys the slogan, "God is Greater, Death to America, Death to Israel, A Curse Upon the Jews, Victory to Islam."

Rockford Weitz, director of the Maritime Studies Program at Fletcher University, noted that Ansar Allah's relationship with Iran has helped the group establish itself as a distinctive threat to maritime shipping. As a result of these ties, he said "the Houthis have access to much more sophisticated weapons against ships than we have seen deployed by pirates."

"They also have political rather than economic aims in attacking commercial shipping," Weitz told *Newsweek*. "Given these differences, the Houthis have been able to use attacks on commercial shipping to exert more pressure on geopolitical issues than any other non-state actor targeting shipping."

"Axis of Resistance" forces have lashed out against both Israel and the U.S. on other fronts in the Middle East since the outbreak of the war in Gaza. But Ibrahim Jalal, a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute, argued that Ansar Allah's strategy marked a particularly significant breakthrough for Iranian aims.

"This approach does demonstrate the increasing role of the IRGC in expanding its sphere of influence and control," Jalal told *Newsweek*, "and how its transfer of drones and missiles, along with other relevant capabilities, including underwater unmanned vehicles, does expand the scale, scope and nature of threats and the ability of non-state actors to influence international trade international security in a way that challenges the traditional states-centered view of power."

The Ansar Allah campaign "also signals shifts in the norms and tactics of asymmetric warfare, particularly by Iranian-backed proxies and partners," according to Jalal.

**Mission Unaccomplished**

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution that ousted a West-backed monarchy in Iran, the rivalry between Washington and Tehran has played out in complex ways across the Middle East, often with the two sides directly opposing one another but sometimes finding common ground against Sunni movements such as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and the Islamic State ([*ISIS*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/isis?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)).

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq 21 years ago fully demonstrated this complicated dynamic as Iran opposed both then-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and the ultraconservative Sunni Muslim militias that arose after his deposal but also backed Shiite Muslim movements that targeted U.S. troops for years. Today, U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Syria continue to face rocket and drone attacks by a coalition of Iran-aligned groups known as the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, putting Baghdad in [*a difficult position*](https://www.newsweek.com/iraq-warns-us-destabilize-attacks-militias-1846189?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) between its two top security partners.

When civil war came to Yemen, the U.S. aided longtime partner Saudi Arabia in its bid to prevent an Iran-backed Shiite Muslim power from emerging south of its border. But just as human rights concerns over Israel's campaign in Gaza have put pressure on the Biden administration's aid to its ally today, the Saudi initiative in Yemen raised widespread reports of civilian casualties in a country already plagued by what the [*United Nations*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/united-nations?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) deemed the world's worst humanitarian crisis due to conflict, poverty, famine and disease.

Biden, who suspended military aid to Riyadh as one of the first major foreign policy acts of his presidency, has sought to convey a continuing commitment to resolving the war in Yemen, even amidst the Ansar Allah attacks at sea. Jalal, however, felt the U.S. was coming up short in its efforts to address what he believed to be the underlying issues fueling Ansar Allah's position.

"The irony here is that the West continues to attempt to regard the Houthi Red Sea attacks in a way detached from the second issue, the conflict dynamics in Yemen," Jalal said. "And by doing that, they risk not dealing with those causes of Houthi maritime attacks in a strategic long-term trajectory in a way that might keep actually the tools of leverage, power, subjugation active in the future."

"Maybe it's time for the West to assess the failed strategy adopted and led by the United States," he added, "and actually address this in the way it should be."

When a reporter asked him in January if he felt the U.S.-led campaign against Ansar Allah was working, Biden responded, "Well, when you say working, are they stopping the Houthis? No. Are they going to continue? Yes."

**It Could Get Worse**

The International Monetary Fund has estimated that shipping through the Suez Canal, which connects the Red and Mediterranean Seas and serves as the shortest maritime route between Asia and Europe, has dropped by half in comparison with last year.

Shipping giants such as Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd have redirected vessels to sail around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope, the path of choice prior to the Suez Canal's construction more than 150 years ago.

On Thursday, however, Ansar Allah announced that this route, too, would be targeted as the group seeks to broaden the campaign against any vessel deemed to be linked to Israel.

"If the Houthis expand the geographic scope of their attacks to the Indian Ocean, we could see more global shipping between Asia and Europe diverted to the Cape of Good Hope route," Weitz said. "We could also see shipping lines shift even further away from Yemen as they transit the Indian Ocean."

"This would put further pressure on global shipping capacity," he added. "It would also further reduce Suez Canal revenues for Egypt, and it would require the navy ships assigned to protect commercial shipping near Yemen to cover a larger geography, so more naval assets may be needed."

Salvatore Mercogliano, an associate professor at Campbell University and adjunct professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, also told *Newsweek* that such a move "will impact ships that have destinations in the Persian Gulf of Arabian Gulf, including India."

This outcome, he said, "may necessitate the use of more anti-ballistic destroyers from the U.S. in the area, which would mean a larger commitment."

Albert Vidal, a research analyst at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, was skeptical that Ansar Allah had the capacity to expand its campaign to further stretches of the Indian Ocean given the range limitations of the group's equipment and intelligence supplied from domestic systems or those of Iran.

Still, he relayed that "the Houthi maritime attacks are notable, not least of all for the first strike using a ballistic missile against a ship, even if the missile was of a comparatively simple design."

"They've also sustained a high frequency of attacks," Vidal told *Newsweek*, "and have used wave attacks of over two dozen UAVs, as well as a mix of systems—unmanned aerial, surface, and underwater vehicles—to try to overcome defenses."

Ralby, too, cast suspicion on Ansar Allah's claims to be able to actually open new fronts into the depths of the Indian Ocean. At the same time, he warned that, given attacks that have been reported in recent months against ships as far away from Yemen as the coast of India, "whether we believe them or not, we need to be prepared for them to actually make good on that."

**"A Rubik's Cube of Hell"**

The Biden administration has sought to adopt a cautious, calculated approach to striking at "Axis of Resistance" groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, with an eye on deterring Iran while messaging that the U.S. did not seek an all-out war. Tehran, which denies having any command or control over such groups, has also signaled that it did not want the Middle East's growing crisis to spread.

Ralby cautioned that expanding [*U.S. military*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/u.s.-military?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) operations against Ansar Allah may only further feed into their sense of self-importance on the world stage. In [*recent interviews with Newsweek*](https://www.newsweek.com/houthis-warn-all-force-will-used-respond-us-bombing-yemen-1860095?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), the group's officials have asserted that "their dream in life is to fight the Zionists and the Americans."

"They're claiming to be at war with the U.S. and the U.K. Now we've gifted it to them so much that we have to figure out a way to extract ourselves from that situation," Ralby said. "Because it does us no good, it does the region no good, it does global trade no good for the U.S. to be the face of the engagement with the Houthis because that is exactly what the Houthis want."

And yet, Ralby argued that it was incumbent upon Washington to draw up a new strategy to counter the group "in an effective manner, and that may not be through direct U.S. confrontation."

Part of the urgency of this effort, he said, was the existence of brewing tensions in the Horn of Africa, where the risk of cutting off the critical port of Djibouti could reignite "a whole other set of conflicts" on the continent. He called it "a Rubik's cube of hell."

Beyond this, "there may be a lot of other groups that are inspired" by Ansar Allah's attacks at sea, as the Yemeni rebels' successful campaign has established such methods as "a much more attractive proposition to enter the world stage," Ralby said.

Mercogliano, for his part, noted another contemporary example of asymmetrical warfare at sea. Ukrainian forces have managed to forcefully reopen Black Sea ports by striking Russia's Black Sea Fleet amid their ongoing war, and now "the Houthis are building on this by using drones and missiles," he said.

"This is a signal to not just nations but actors around the world how they can influence world ***politics***," Mercogliano said. "This is being done against ships, but what about aircraft in the future or other maritime chokepoints?"

"The other issue is the inability of governments and militaries to fight such a threat and enemy," he added. "While the U.S. Navy is winning in the battles against drones, they are losing the war because shipping is not returning to the area due to the war risk and costs associated with sailing through it."

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2363329/cargo-ship-rubymar-sinking-after-houthi-attack.jpg)

**Graphic**

Cargo, ship, Rubymar, sinking, after, Houthi, attack

Al-Joumhouria/Getty Images

This handout photo provided by Yemen's Al-Joumhouria TV shows the U.K.-registered, Belize-flagged cargo ship Rubymar sinking after it was targeted by Yemen's Ansar Allah in international waters in the Red Sea, on March 7.

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