



Houthi military-terrorist escalation and the deterioration of the situation in the Red Sea

February 4, 2024

Overview¹

- ▶ Since the start of Operation Iron Swords (October 7, 2023), the Houthi campaign in the Red Sea area has escalated and drawn in many participants, the most important of which are the United States, Britain and Iran, whose involvement has increased. Initially the Houthis launched missiles and UAVs at Israel, but their tactics gradually morphed into attacking ships sailing in the Red Sea and near the coast of Yemen which they identified as "having connections to Israel."
- ▶ As the war continued, and especially during December and January 2024, the campaign in the Red Sea area expanded to become part of the combat arena between Israel, the Gaza Strip and Lebanon. The involvement of the United States, Britain and their allies, which began with threats and diplomatic efforts to stop the Houthi attacks on the ships sailing in the area, continued with the establishment of a multinational force whose purpose is to protect the ships. When the actions of the force failed to deter the Houthis, the United States, Britain and its allies began to attack Houthi targets inside Yemen which were identified as connected to the attacks on the ships.
- ▶ Houthi and Iranian spokesmen admit that Iran supports the activities of the Houthis and has helped to strengthen their military capabilities, but both sides deny a direct Iranian involvement in the campaign in the Red Sea. The Iranians claim the Houthis make decisions and take action independently and based on their own considerations. Those claims contradict the reports and statements of American and European spokesmen, who have stated that Iran is in fact directly involved in the campaign in the Red Sea and is assisting the Houthis operationally and with intelligence by helping them plan their operations, sending them advanced weapons, training Houthi forces and providing intelligence assistance for

¹ This document is the third ITIC study dealing with the activities of the Houthi movement within the framework of Operation Iron Swords. For the previous documents see the November 2, 2023 study, "[The Houthis and Operation Iron Swords](#)," and the December 17, 2023 study, "[Military-Terrorist Activities of the Houthis in Yemen during Operation Iron Swords](#)."

the Houthi attacks on ships. In ITIC assessment, Iran is directly involved in the activities of the Houthis and assists them in various ways.

►The Houthis carry out direct attacks on Israel, such as launching missiles and UAVs continue, but their frequency has declined significantly, apparently due to the failure of the Houthis to penetrate the IDF and American Army aerial defenses and hit targets inside Israel. In ITIC assessment, the campaign in the Red Sea area can be expected to continue as long as the war in the Gaza Strip continues. Recently a kind of balance of actions and reactions has been created, and it will be difficult to halt it without intervention to convince the Houthis to withdraw their demand for an end to the fighting in the Gaza Strip as a condition for stopping their attacks. Without external intervention (especially directly from Iran, but possibly also from Russia and China indirectly through Iran), it is likely that the Houthis will continue their attacks since their actions give them legitimacy. They also provide them with a reputation as a significant regional force with leverage for its objectives in Yemen's internal struggle and against regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Background Information

►The Houthi movement in Yemen has been operating with increasing frequency and intensity in the Red Sea region since the start of Operation Iron Swords. Initially the Houthis attacked Israel with long-range missiles and UAVs; later, they began attacking ships sailing in the Red Sea and along the coast of Yemen. For the most part they were cargo ships which the Houthis claimed had connections to Israel and participated in the extensive maritime trade in the Straits of Bab al-Mandeb, near Yemen, which separate the Red Sea from the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean.

►According to the Houthis, the reason behind their attacks and deep involvement in a war in the Middle East is Israel's military activity in the Gaza Strip. Throughout the war the Houthis have claimed that as long as Israel continues its war in the Gaza Strip, they will continue attacking Israel and ships associated with it.

►Employing an extensive arsenal of advanced weapons, the Houthis were able to launch missiles and UAVs as far as Israel's south (which were intercepted before they could cause damage), and more importantly, they have damaged a large number of vessels which they claim have connections to Israel. In the wake of the attacks, the growing threat to maritime activities and the resulting substantial economic costs, Western countries such as the United

States Britain and France sent warships to protect vessels vulnerable to attack, and if necessary, respond to the Houthis.

► In recent months, the military activity in the Red Sea arena has intensified significantly and it has drawn participants with different and opposing interests, such as the United States, Iran, Great Britain, and France, and in addition, it has affected the actions of many other countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, India and Egypt. A broader campaign could be ignited if military operations go beyond the borders of Yemen, especially a conflict between Iran and Western countries, such as the United States and Britain.

The Houthis Expand Their Attacks

► In December 2023 and January 2024 the conflict in the Red Sea region and Yemen escalated significantly. The Houthis increased their attacks on ships that sailed to the coast of Yemen, and accordingly the United States increased its preventive activities. At the same time, the statements of both sides were exaggerated, as were the threats to attack each other's targets.

► On December 15, 2023, **Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces**, announced that the Houthis had attacked several ships which, he claimed, were en route to Israel. He again threatened that as long as the Israeli activity in the Gaza Strip continued and the residents of the Gaza Strip did not receive the medicines they needed, the Houthi attacks would also continue (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 1, 2023). The next day, the threat was confirmed when the United States Army's Central Command (CENTCOM) reported preventing several UAV and anti-ship missile attacks (CENTCOM X account, December 16, 2023). In response, on December 17, 2023, the United States reported it was seriously considering the possibility of attacking the Houthis in Yemeni territory. According to reports, the aircraft carrier Dwight Eisenhower was moved from the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Aden (Politico, December 17, 2023).



**Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces
(al-Mayadeen X account, November 14, 2023)**

► In the following days, the Houthis continued to attack vessels fully or partially owned by Israeli companies, but also attacked non-Israeli vessels which they claimed were sailing to Israel. Many shipping companies announced they had stopped sailing in the Red Sea. Accordingly, the marine insurance market designated the Red Sea region as a high-risk area and indicated there would be significant and direct consequences for insurance fees in the shipping sector (Reuters, December 18, 2023). In response to the Houthi attacks, **Lloyd Austin, the United States Secretary of Defense**, announced the beginning of Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect the trade routes in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. According to the announcement, Great Britain, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles and Spain would participate in the operation, a multinational force designed to jointly face the security challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to ensure freedom of navigation for all countries and to strengthen regional security and prosperity (Department of Defense website, December 18, 2023). It should be noted that Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not participate in the force, apparently to avoid a confrontation with the Houthis and Iran.

► In response, members of the Houthi leadership announced that they would continue their operations against the "ships sailing to Israel" and respond to any aggression against them. **Major General Muhammad Nasser al-Atifi, the minister of defense in the Houthi government**, also claimed the Houthi forces had means to sink the ships, submarines, and aircraft carriers that threaten them, and threatened the Red Sea would become their graveyard (Tasnim, December 19, 2023). In addition, **Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthi movement**, said their actions were aimed only at Israel and those related to it,

and other ships were not in danger. He claimed that the United States, with support from others, was trying to militarize the Red Sea and its surroundings. He advised all countries to reject the attempts and threatened that if the United States attacked the Houthis, American ships would also be targeted (al-Jazeera, December 20, 2023).

►Western assessments that Iran² is directly involved in the campaign in the Red Sea area was confirmed when on December 22, 2023, there were reports in the American press that the Iranian spy ship Behsha was passing intelligence to the Houthis in Yemen in real time which allowed them to launch UAVs and missiles at ships sailing in the Red Sea. According to the report, many vessels passing through the Red Sea turned off their radios to avoid real-time surveillance, but the Iranian ship stationed in the area provided the Houthis with intelligence enabling them to accurately locate the ships (Wall Street Journal, December 22, 2023). Meanwhile, **Adrienne Watson, spokesperson for the American National Security Council**, said that Iran had considerable involvement in the planning of the Houthis' operations against merchant ships in the Red Sea. She stated that Iran's intelligence information allowed the Houthis to carry out their attacks (Reuters, December 22, 2023).

►On December 31, 2023, a conversation was held between **Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, Iranian foreign minister**, and his British counterpart, **David Cameron**. Cameron told Abdollahian that Iran bore the responsibility of preventing the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea due to its support for them over the years. Abdollahian said Iran would respond strongly to any aggression by the "Zionist entity" and that halting a "Zionist ship in the Red Sea" could not be seen as threatening the security of the shipping lanes, while it was possible for Israel to "massacre of women and children" and "set fire to the area" (ISNA, December 31, 2023). On the same day, **Ali-Akbar Ahmadian, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council**, met with the spokesman of the Ansarallah movement (the Houthis in Yemen) and the head of the movement's negotiation team, **Mohamed Abdel Salam**, to discuss common issues and developments concerning regional security. Ahmadian praised the actions of the Houthis in support of the Palestinians (IRNA, December 31, 2023).

² For more on Iran's involvement in the Houthis' operations in Operation Iron Swords and the relationship between the two, see Michael Knights, "An Heir and a Spare?: How Yemen's 'Southern Hezbollah' Could Change Iran's Deterrent Calculus," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Notes 142, December 2023.

The United States and Its Allies Increase the Pressure

►The situation in the Red Sea arena deteriorated significantly on December 31, 2023, when the Central Command of the United States Army (CENTCOM) announced that a Danish container ship belonging to Maersk was attacked by four Houthi boats which shot at the ship's crew, who returned fire. American helicopters responding to the ship's distress signal sank three of the four boats and their crews were killed. A fourth boat managed to escape (CENTCOM X account, December 31, 2023). It was the first direct confrontation between United States and Houthi forces since the beginning of the campaign in the Red Sea. Later that day, **Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces**, confirmed that ten Houthis had been killed and the United States bore responsibility "for the crime" and its consequences. He said the United States military operations in the Red Sea, which were intended to protect Israeli ships, would not prevent Yemen from "fulfilling its duty to support the Palestinians." He warned other countries not to join the American operations, as that would have negative effects. He reiterated that the Houthi forces would continue to prevent the passage of Israeli ships or other ships sailing to Israeli ports (Yahya Saria's X account, December 31, 2023).



**Eight of the ten Houthis who died in the attempt to take over the Danish ship
(September 21website, January 1, 2024)**

►On January 4, 2024, the UN Security Council convened to discuss the developments in the Red Sea. The **United States representative** to the UN said the threat to navigation rights and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea was an international challenge that required a global response. He said the root of the problem was that Iran had been funding the Houthis

for many years. The **Russian representative** to the UN claimed it could not be denied that the situation in the Red Sea was a direct consequence of the violence in the Gaza Strip and Israel's activities. He claimed the United States was protecting Israel and holding the members of the Security Council hostage by vetoing any resolution that demanded an immediate Israeli ceasefire (UN website, January 4, 2024).

►Earlier, **12 countries, led by the United States, issued a joint statement regarding the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea**; the countries included Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Germany, Japan and Great Britain. According to the statement, the attacks threatened the lives of innocent people from all over the world, and the signatories called for an end to the attacks in the Red Sea and for the release of the hijacked ships and their crews. The announcement also stated that the Houthis would bear the consequences if they continued to threaten the global economy and free trade (White House website, January 3, 2024).

►In response to the statement, **Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi political bureau**, said they advised the countries threatening Yemen to aspire to stop the crimes in "Palestine," not to defend their perpetrators, and to deal with the causes of the problem rather than its results. He claimed the actions of the Yemeni Navy were "moral" and would continue until the [alleged] "crimes of genocide" in the Gaza Strip stopped and food, medicine and fuel were brought in for its residents (Mohammed al-Bukhaiti's X account, January 4, 2024).

►Iranian involvement in Houthi operations was again exposed on January 10, 2024, when the British Daily Telegraph reported that 200 Houthi operatives had undergone training at the Iranian Naval Academy on the shores of the Caspian Sea. The paper also stated that Iranian leader Ali Khamenei had personally participated in the decision to impose a blockade on Israel in the Red Sea by means of the Houthis and supported the transfer of weapons and equipment to them (The Daily Telegraph, January 10, 2024). The next day, the UN Security Council passed a resolution strongly condemning the Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea. The resolution required the Houthis to immediately stop the attacks and release the ship Galaxy Leader and its crew. Eleven countries voted in favor of the resolution; four countries, including Russia and China, abstained (UN website, January 11, 2024).

►In response to the Security Council resolution, **Houthi spokesman Mohamed Abdel Salam** claimed it was a political game and that the United States was the one violating international law (Reuters, January 11, 2024). **Mohammad Ali al-Houthi, a member of the**

Houthi political bureau, called on the Security Council to free all residents of the Gaza Strip from the Israeli-American blockade and noted that the actions of the Yemeni army were being carried out within the framework of "legal defense" (Mohammad Ali al-Houthi's Telegram channel, January 11, 2024).

The United States and Britain Attack Yemen

►On the night of January 11, 2024, United States and British forces attacked Houthi targets in Yemen. A senior American official stated that more than 30 targets in Yemen had been attacked (Reuters, January 12, 2024). **Nasr Al-Din Amer, chairman of the board of directors of the Yemeni news agency**, reported on American, British and "Zionist" attacks in the capital Sana'a, and in the cities of al-Hudaydah, Sa'adah and Dhamar (Nasr al-Din Amer's X account, January 12, 2024).



United States Navy ship and fighter jet during the broad attack in Yemen on January 11, 2024 (CENTCOM X account, January 12, 2024)

►**American President Joe Biden** said in a statement that the United States military forces, together with Great Britain and with the support of Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands, had successfully carried out strikes on several Houthi targets in Yemen. He said the attacks were a direct response to the Houthi attacks on international vessels in the Red Sea and were a clear message that the United States and its partners would not tolerate attacks on their own people or allow hostile forces to endanger freedom of navigation. He also stated that he would not hesitate to order that additional steps be taken (White House website, January 12, 2024). According to a joint statement issued by the United States, Great Britain, South Korea, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Canada, Bahrain and Australia, "the goal is to reduce tensions and restore stability in the Red Sea" (Agence France-Presse, January 12, 2024).

► **Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces**, reported that on the night of January 12, 2024, the "American-British enemy" carried out 73 attacks against Yemen. He said the attacks had caused the deaths of five members of the armed forces and wounded six others, adding that the United States and Britain bore full responsibility for the "aggression" and it would not go unanswered (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, January 12, 2024). The Houthis' supreme political council said in a statement that in response to the "aggression," all American and British interests in the region had become "legitimate targets" for Yemen's armed forces (al-Masirah, January 12, 2024).

► **Nasser Kanaani, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry**, strongly condemned the attack, claiming Yemen's sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as international law had clearly been violated, adding that the United States and Great Britain were trying to divert world attention from Israel's [alleged] "crimes" against the Palestinian people by expanding their support for the "the Zionist regime." Kanaani called on the international community to act responsibly to prevent the spread of war and instability in the region (IRNA, January 12, 2024). Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, Iranian foreign minister, also condemned the attack. He praised "Yemen's support for women and children in the Gaza Strip" and noted that instead of attacking Yemen with its military, the United States should immediately stop military and security cooperation with Israel against the residents of the Gaza Strip, Judea and Samaria in order to restore security (Hossein-Amir Abdollahian's X account, January 12, 2024).

► The direct confrontation between the Houthis and the United States continued to escalate on January 13, 2024, when CENTCOM announced that at 3:45 a.m. (Sana'a time) United States forces had attacked a Houthi radar site in Yemen. It was also reported that the attack continued the attacks of the previous day (January 12) whose objective had been to damage the Houthis' ability to attack vessels (CENTCOM X account, January 13, 2024). On January 15, 2024, CENTCOM reported that the Houthis had launched an anti-ship ballistic missile that hit the United States-owned M/V Gibraltar Eagle, which flew the Marshall Islands flag. It was also reported that United States forces detected an anti-ship ballistic missile launched towards the commercial shipping lanes of the southern Red Sea, and that it fell in Yemeni territory (CENTCOM X account, January 15, 2024). **Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces**, said that the navy had attacked an American ship in the Gulf of Aden with naval missiles and scored a direct hit. He stated they considered all the American and British ships participating in the "aggression" against Yemen as hostile targets, and claimed any attack

would bring a response and no new attack would go unanswered or "unpunished." He also claimed they allowed trade in the Arabian and Red Seas to all destinations except Israeli ports (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, January 15, 2024).

►On January 16, 2024, CENTCOM announced that the United States Navy had taken over a vessel near the coast of Somalia on which advanced Iranian weapons were found, including parts of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles for the Houthis. According to the announcement, it was the first seizure of advanced weapons supplied to the Houthis by Iran since the beginning of the attacks in the Red Sea. In addition, two American soldiers who were reported missing had been involved in the operation. The announcement stated it was further proof of how Iran violated international law and destabilized the region (CENTCOM X account, January 16, 2024). It was also reported that American forces attacked and destroyed four Houthi anti-ship ballistic missiles which were being prepared for launch (CENTCOM X account, January 16, 2024). Following the attacks, **White House Spokesman John Kirby** said the United States was not looking for a war with the Houthis and did not want to expand it in the region. He added that the Houthis had time to make the right choice, which was to stop their reckless attacks (Reuters, January 16, 2024).



Iranian weapons en route to the Houthis which were seized on a vessel near the coast of Somalia in a United States Navy raid (CENTCOM X account, January 16, 2024)

►On January 17, 2024, **the secretary general of the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades militia** sent a letter to Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthis in Yemen, promising to treat any attack against him from any country or entity, large or small, as a direct attack against the Brigades. He added that they were not deterred by challenges, no matter what their type, size or from which side they came (Hezbollah Brigades Telegram channel, January 17, 2024).

►Meanwhile, **United States National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan**, published a statement putting the Houthis back on the United States State Department's list of designated terrorist organizations (White House website, January 17, 2024). According to the Americans, it would be possible to change the designation if the Houthis stopped their attacks, and it would take effect in 30 days (Agence France-Presse, January 17, 2024).

►On January 17, 2024, the American Army continued its attacks against Houthi targets and CENTCOM announced that its forces had attacked 14 missiles ready for launching in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. It was also reported that the missiles posed an immediate threat to merchant ships in the Red Sea and could be launched at any time, therefore the American Army exercised its right to defend itself. According to the announcement, the attacks, together with other actions, would reduce the Houthis' ability to continue attacking international shipping in the Red Sea (CENTCOM X account, January 18, 2024). "An official American source" stated that it was the fourth round of United States attacks against the Houthis (CBS, January 18, 2024). The Houthis reported that the attacks had taken place in the areas of Al-Hudaydah, Taizz, Dhamar, al-Bayda and Sa'adah (al-Masira, January 18, 2024).

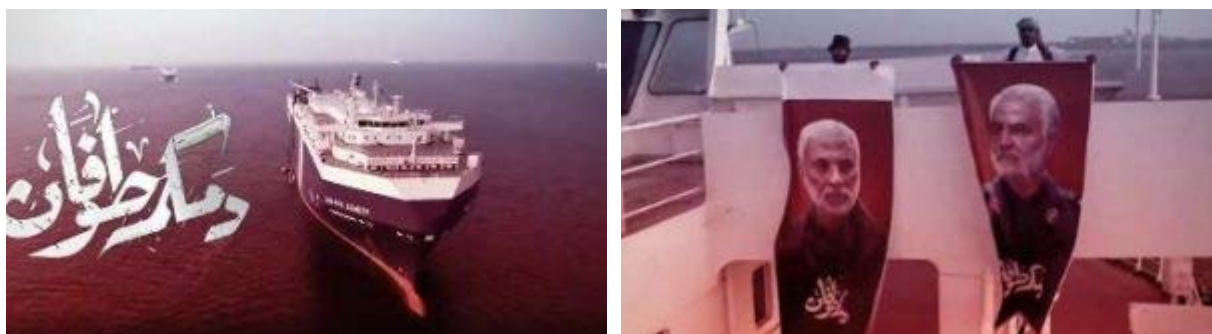
►On January 18, 2024, **Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthis**, gave a speech in which he said that the "aggression" against them was a direct violation of Yemen's sovereignty, and that the American-British "aggression" would not affect their military capabilities or attacks. He claimed the United States "knew" that as its "aggression" against them escalated, they would further develop their military capabilities. He also stated that their naval position influenced and exerted pressure on the enemy and that their operations would include American and British ships. He also called for the boycott of American and Israeli goods and to have a direct influence in the struggle (al-Masirah, January 18, 2024).

►Interviewed by Reuters on January 19, 2024, **Mohammed Abdel Salam, a spokesman for the Houthis**, claimed that the United States intervention escalated the situation, the attacks against them were a flagrant violation of Yemen's sovereignty and constituted a danger. Relating to Iran-Yemen relations, he said they did not deny they had relations with Iran and had benefited from Iranian experience in manufacture and military infrastructure. However, he claimed Yemen's decisions were completely independent. Asked if they had received communiqués from Iran to stop the attacks, he replied that they had not and he did not believe they would. He also claimed they were not interested in further escalation and if

Saudi Arabia and the UAE did not support or participate in any attack, they would remain outside the conflict (Abdel Salam's Telegram channel, January 19, 2024).³

►On January 20, 2024, Reuters reported that Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah commanders were in Yemen to help the Houthis direct their attacks in the Red Sea. According to the report, based on four regional and two Iranian sources, Iran increased its arms supply to the Houthis following the war in Gaza and provided them with advanced UAVs, anti-ship cruise missiles, precision ballistic missiles and medium-range missiles. The report also stated that IRGC commanders and advisors were providing the Houthis with technology, information and intelligence support to determine which ships in the Red Sea were sailing to Israel (Reuters, January 20, 2024).

►On the same day, the Houthis released a video the Galaxy Leader, of one of the ships they hijacked. In the video, the organization's operatives are seen aboard the ship, hanging up pictures of Qassem Soleimani, former commander of the IRGC Qods Force, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandas and the former head of the Iraqi pro-Iranian militias. In the video the waters of the Red Sea were dyed the color of blood, and the caption "Flood of your blood" appeared in a way that corresponded with Operation al-Aqsa Flood (Suhufi Abujud's Telegram channel, January 20, 2024).



**From the "Flood of your blood" video published by the Houthis
(Suhufi Abujud's Telegram channel, January 20, 2024)**

►On January 21, 2024, Sky News in Arabic reported that more than 75 people had been killed in the latest United States-led attacks on the Houthis in Yemen. According to the report, which was based on sources who spoke to the network's correspondent, the attacks also

³ It should be noted that since the start of the Houthis' attacks against vessels that they claim are "connected to Israel," the Houthis have been careful to state frequently that they do not harm other vessels and that they are not interested in an escalation beyond that. After the United States and Britain began attacking Houthi targets in Yemen, the Houthis intensified their threats against them but officially continued to state that they do not want a wide war but to stop "Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip."

killed three IRGC experts and six Hezbollah operatives, who assisted the Houthis (Sky News, January 21, 2024). No confirmation was found for the data from other sources.

►The attacks by the United States and its allies continued and on January 22, 2024, the Pentagon published a joint statement with the UK, Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands stating that the United States and the UK had carried out a round of attacks against the Houthis in Yemen. According to the report, the attacks were directed against an underground storage facility for missiles and other Houthi weapons, and that the objective of the attacks had been to damage the Houthis' ability to threaten global trade and the lives of innocent sailors (Reuters, January 23, 2024). **Hazam al-Assad, a member of the Houthis' political bureau**, said in response that the sites hit by the United States and UK attacks were open areas or former military bases and that the attack would not stop them from attacking Israeli ships (al-Arabi, January 23, 2024). **Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces**, stated that during the night British and American planes had attacked 18 times, 12 attacks on targets in and around Sana'a, three in the al-Hudaydah district, two in the Taizz district and one in the al-Bayda district. He said the attacks would not go "unpunished" (Yahia Saria's Telegram channel, January 22, 2024).

►In an attempt to prevent the Houthis from attacking ships, and in addition to attacking the Houthis' assets and munitions warehouses, the United States began to carry out frequent attacks against missile launch sites which it claimed were being prepared to attack targets at sea. The Houthis do not refer to United States statements in the media regarding such attacks or claim that they are ineffective and fall in open areas. On the other hand, when the United States and its allies have carried out broad attacks on weapons depots or important assets, the Houthis often acknowledge the existence of the attacks and respond with calls for revenge and retaliation. Like the conflicting reports regarding the results of the attacks in Yemen, sometimes there are also conflicting reports regarding the results of Houthi attacks on vessels and in terms of damage and casualties. In the past the Houthis acted similarly regarding attacks on Israel, claiming to have hit targets in Israel when in fact they did not penetrate Israel's aerial defense systems.

►In addition to military activity, the United States exerts diplomatic pressure in an attempt to halt the Houthi attacks. On January 27, 2024, Reuters reported **United States National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan** met with **Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi** and pressured him to use China's influence on Iran to help curb Iranian support for the Houthis. China

replied that it would raise the issue with the Iranian government. The United States is waiting to find out if China has in fact done so and if it was effective (Reuters, January 27, 2024). Even before the meeting, according to reports, Chinese officials had asked their Iranian counterparts to help curb the attacks of the Houthis on ships in the Red Sea. According to "sources" mentioned in the report, China wants to protect its interests, since if one of its ships is damaged, trade relations between the countries will be affected. The "sources" stated that several meetings were recently held in China and Iran on the subject, but refrained from elaborating (Reuters, January 26, 2024).

Iranian Involvement in the Red Sea Arena

►Iran, which has supported the Houthi movement for many years, continues to be an important part in its activities in the current conflict. Beyond its unqualified support and justification for the Houthis' actions, Iran has repeatedly claimed that the Houthis' decision-making and actions are carried out independently and prompted by their own considerations. Nevertheless, sources such as the United States and Great Britain continue to state that Iran is directly involved in the campaign and is assisting the Houthis operationally and with intelligence by helping them plan their operations, transferring advanced weapons to Yemen, training Houthi forces and providing intelligence assistance for attacking ships in the region.

►The United States and British claims have been supported by reports that confirm Iranian involvement:

- ◆A report on the presence of an Iranian ship used to gather intelligence for the Houthis for their attacks (Wall Street Journal, December 22, 2023).
- ◆A report that 200 Houthi operatives were trained at the Iranian Naval Academy and that Iran's leader, Ali Khamenei, personally took part in the decision to use the Houthis to lay siege to Israel from the Red Sea (The Daily Telegraph, January 10, 2024).
- ◆The United States Navy's seizure of a vessel near the coast of Somalia found to be carrying advanced Iranian weapons. The Navy claimed it was the first seizure of advanced weapons supplied to the Houthis by Iran, a violation of all international law and an attack on the stability of the region (CENTCOM X account, January 16, 2024).

- ◆ A report of the presence of IRGC and Hezbollah commanders in Yemen, who help the Houthis direct their attacks in the Red Sea. According to the report, Iran increased its arms supply to the Houthis following the outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip and provided them with advanced UAVs, anti-ship cruise missiles, precision ballistic missiles and medium-range missiles. The report also stated that IRGC commanders and advisors provide the Houthis with technology, information and intelligence support to determine which of the ships in the Red Sea are headed for Israel (Reuters, January 20, 2024).
- ◆ A report that United States strikes in Yemen killed three IRGC experts and six Hezbollah operatives who assisted the Houthis (Sky News, January 21, 2024).
- ◆ The reports and the American and British claims regarding Iran's involvement led the United States to appeal to China to exert its influence on Iran to curb its support for the Houthis' actions (Reuters, January 27, 2024).

► **In ITIC assessment, agreeing with the claims of the United States and the UK, Iran is in fact directly involved in the Houthis' actions and assists them in various ways, including the transfer of advanced weapons and high-quality intelligence.** In all probability the assistance will continue as long as no pressure is exerted on Iran to stop. Apparently, it now seems preferable take diplomatic efforts through actors such as China and Russia, however, the dynamics of the Red Sea arena, which itself is part of the overall campaign in the Middle East, could escalate because of unforeseen events.

Direct Attacks on Israel

► As the attacks on ships increased, the Houthis reduced their efforts to attack Israeli territory. Apparently, because of their failure to penetrate the Israeli defense systems, the Houthis changed their modus operandi to attacking ships sailing near Yemen. The change has two advantages for the Houthis: it increases the chance of hitting the targets, given their proximity, and it enhances their military reputation (which was damaged by their failure to directly attack Israel), following the considerable impact the attacks have on international trade and their consequences. Recently, however, the Houthis have carried out a number of actions directly targeting Israel:

- ◆ On December 16, 2023, **Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces,** announced that "following the calls of the people in Yemen and for the sake of the

victory of the Palestinian people," they had carried out a military operation against "sensitive targets" in the Eilat area using a large number of UAVs, (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 16, 2023). Senior "Egyptian sources" said the Egyptian aerial defense systems had detected a "flying object" and shot it down. They added that "Egyptian investigation teams arrived at the crash site off the coast of the city of Dahab [in the eastern Sinai Peninsula]" (al-Qahera Network, December 16, 2023).

- ◆ On December 26, 2023, an Israeli Air Force fighter jet intercepted a hostile aerial target in the Red Sea area which was en route to Israeli territory (IDF spokesperson, December 26, 2023). **Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces**, confirmed that Yemeni Air Force forces had attacked military targets in the Eilat area and other areas "in occupied Palestine" by means of UAVs (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 26, 2023).
- ◆ On January 13, 2024, the Houthis published documentation from an exercise carried out by their forces simulating an attack on Israeli targets from the air and on the ground, taking control of an Israeli "settlement" and IDF headquarters, and taking hostages. The exercise included the use of drones, missiles and a tank. The exercise took place in the northern Sa'adah district, the Houthi stronghold in northern Yemen. The commander of the exercise stated that the campaign was at sea, on land and in the air. During the exercise, the operatives walked on the United States flag and the picture of the prime minister of Israel (Telegram channel of the Houthis Ansar Allah movement, January 13, 2024).

Appendix – Attacks Attributed to the Houthis⁴

► In the months of December 2023 and January 2024, the Houthis changed their modus operandi, downplaying their attacks on Israeli territory and concentrating on attacking vessels sailing in the Red Sea and near the coast of Yemen.

- ◆ **December 16, 2023:** Fifteen unmanned aerial vehicles and two ballistic missiles were launched against ships in the Red Sea, at least two ships were damaged in the attack (CENTCOM X account, December 16, 2023). In addition, at least one UAV was launched at the territory of Israel and was shot down by Egypt off the Red Sea shore (al-Qahera, December 16, 2023).
- ◆ **December 18, 2023:** A UAV and a ballistic missile were launched at and hit a tanker. In another incident, a ship was hit by an explosion close to it; the source of the explosion is unclear (CENTCOM X account, December 19, 2023).
- ◆ **December 24, 2023:** Two ballistic missiles and at least six UAVs were launched at ships in the Red Sea area. At least one ship was hit (CENTCOM X account, December 24, 2023).
- ◆ **December 26, 2023:** An Israeli Air Force fighter jet intercepted a "hostile aerial target" in the Red Sea area that was on its way to Israeli territory (IDF spokesman, December 26, 2023). In another incident, the Houthis launched 12 UAVs, three ballistic missiles and two cruise missiles to the south of the Red Sea. It was not stated if any ships were damaged (CENTCOM X account, December 26, 2023).
- ◆ **December 29, 2023:** The American destroyer USS Mason intercepted a UAV and a ballistic missile in the south Red Sea launched by the Houthis. According to reports, no ship in the area at the time of the attack was damaged (CENTCOM X account, December 29, 2023).
- ◆ **December 31, 2023:** The warship USS Gravelly intercepted two ballistic missiles launched at it by the Houthis. No casualties or damage were reported (CENTCOM X account, December 31, 2023). Later, CENTCOM announced that the Maersk container ship Hangzhou had been attacked by four Houthi boats that fired at the ship's crew, who returned fire. American helicopters responding to the distress call arrived at the

⁴ In this study, events reported starting from December 14, 2023 are mentioned. For a list of earlier events, see the December 15, 2023 ITIC study "[The activities of the Houthi movement in Yemen during Operation Iron Swords.](#)"

scene. Three of the four boats were sunk and their crews were killed. A fourth boat managed to escape the area (CENTCOM X account, December 31, 2023). At least ten Houthis were killed and two wounded in the attack (Reuters, December 31, 2023; Yahya Saria's X account, December 31, 2023).

- ◆ **January 2, 2024:** Two ballistic missiles were launched at the south Red Sea. No damage was reported to any ships in the area at the time of the attack (CENTCOM X Account, 3 January 2024).
- ◆ **January 4, 2024:** An unmanned vessel was detonated in the Red Sea without causing damage (Reuters, January 4, 2024).
- ◆ **January 6, 2024:** A UAV was intercepted by an American ship, no damage was reported (CENTCOM X account, January 6, 2024).
- ◆ **January 9, 2024:** Responding to a very heavy attack, American and British forces intercepted 18 UAVs, two missiles and an anti-ship ballistic missile. No casualties or damage were reported (CENTCOM X Account, January 10, 2024).
- ◆ **January 11, 2024:** A ballistic missile was launched into the Red Sea area, no hit was recorded and no damage was caused (CENTCOM X account, January 11, 2024).
- ◆ **January 12, 2024:** A ballistic missile was launched against ships, no ship was hit (Reuters, January 12, 2024).
- ◆ **January 14, 2024:** A cruise missile was launched at the American destroyer USS Laboon which was sailing in the south Red Sea. The missile was intercepted off the coast of al-Hudaydah in Yemen by an American warplane and no casualties or damage were reported (CENTCOM X account, January 15, 2024).
- ◆ **January 15, 2024:** A ballistic missile hit the United States-owned ship M/V Gibraltar Eagle, which was flying the flag of the Marshall Islands. Later, the United States forces detected a ballistic missile launched at the commercial shipping lanes in the south Red Sea; it fell inside the territory of Yemen (CENTCOM X account, January 15, 2024).
- ◆ **January 16, 2024:** The Houthis claimed they had attacked the Zografia which was en route to Israeli ports, using several naval missiles and detecting a direct hit. The Houthis claimed the attack had been carried out after the crew on board rejected several warning calls (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, January 16, 2024). CENTCOM confirmed that a ballistic missile had hit the ship but no casualties were reported (CENTCON X account, January 16, 2024).

- ◆ **January 17, 2024:** A UAV was launched from areas controlled by the Houthis and hit the M/V Genco Picardye, which was flying the flag of the Marshall Islands. The ship, which had been sailing in the Gulf of Aden, reported no casualties or significant damage and continued on its way (CENTCOM X Account, January 18, 2024).
- ◆ **January 18, 2024:** Two ballistic missiles were fired at the United States-owned M/V Chem Ranger sailing in the Gulf of Aden. No casualties or damage to the ship were reported (CENTCOM X Account. 19 January 2024).
- ◆ **January 24, 2024:** Three ballistic missiles were launched at an American cargo ship. One missile exploded in the open sea and the other two were intercepted by United States naval forces. No casualties or damage were reported (CENTCOM X Account. 24 January 2024).
- ◆ **January 26, 2024:** A ballistic missile was launched at the United States Navy ship USS Carney which was sailing in the Gulf of Aden. The missile was intercepted by the ship and no casualties or damage were reported (CENTCOM X Account. January 26, 2024). Later that day, the Houthis launched another ballistic missile that hit a Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker. Damage was reported to the tanker but there were no casualties (CENTCOM X account, January 27, 2024).
- ◆ **January 27, 2024:** A UAV was launched at the British Navy destroyer HMS Diamond; the UAV was intercepted and no damage was caused (British Ministry of Defense X account, January 28, 2024).