



The Houthis and Operation Iron Swords

November 2, 2023

Overview¹

- ▶ Since the beginning of Operation Iron Swords, on four different occasions missiles and UAVs have been launched at Israel from the Red Sea area, all of which were intercepted before they reached Israel's airspace. The Houthi movement in Yemen claimed responsibility for the attacks. Since the war began, senior figures of the Houthi movement have been threatening that if Israel continued its actions against the Gaza Strip they would not hesitate to join the campaign alongside Hamas.
- ▶ The Houthi movement was established in Yemen in the early 1990s on a foundation of the country's Zaydi Shi'ite Muslims, who make up about 30% of the population. In 2004, the movement rebelled against the centralist government on the grounds that it had become too closely identified with the United States and Israel. By 2009 six rounds of fighting between the parties had taken place, at the end of which the Houthis established an autonomous region in north Yemen. They increased their power and areas of control, and in 2015 deposed the incumbent president. That led to the establishment of a coalition of Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, whose goal was to defeat them and restore the previous regime. In response, the Houthis attacked Saudi Arabia and the UAE using advanced weapons provided by Iran, which has supported them over the years and included them in the "axis of resistance."²
- ▶ The Houthi movement, thanks to assistance from Iran, has at its disposal an arsenal of missiles and UAVs that can attack both Israeli territory and Israeli vessels in the Red Sea and near the coast of Yemen.

¹ This report replaces the March 2023 ITIC report, "The Houthi Movement and the War in Yemen: Development and Significance." The Houthis are part of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Palestinian terrorist organization "resistance axis."

² Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, the Palestinian terrorist organizations and the Houthis in Yemen, whose objective is the destruction of the State of Israel.

▶ In ITIC assessment, the Houthi attacks on Israel were coordinated with Iran, since the Houthis are part of the "axis of resistance." Iran regards the use of pro-Iranian Shi'ite militia proxies in Iraq, Syria and Yemen as an escalation which on the one hand is an expression of the concept of "consolidating the arenas," especially in light of the Israeli ground attack, and which on the other hand does not currently require the participation of Hezbollah in an all-out confrontation with Israel, which might exact a high cost from the organization, and possibly from Iran itself.

▶ The Houthis also have a direct commitment to the Palestinian "struggle," thus it seems that as the war continues they will attempt to attack Israel again.

Weapons and Capabilities

▶ On September 21, 2023, the Houthi authorities held a military display in the city of Sana'a to mark the ninth anniversary of their occupation of the city. Weapons from Iran were displayed for the first time, including a surface-to-surface Iranian Toofan missile, which has a range of 1,350-1,950 kilometers, or about 850 to 1,200 miles and can reach Israeli territory (the distance between north Yemen and the south of Israel is about 1,600 kilometers, or about 1,000 miles).³

▶ The display also featured new shore-to-sea missiles capable of hitting vessels in the Red Sea and near the coast of Yemen, among them Tankil missiles, which have an estimated range of 500 kilometers, or about 300 miles, and Quds Z-0s, which are cruise missiles capable of hitting targets both on land and at sea⁴.

▶ The new weapons joined the extensive arsenal the Houthi movement has accumulated with the massive aid it receives from Iran. It includes surface-to-surface missiles, cruise missiles, shore-to-sea missiles and UAVs of various types with ranges of from tens of kilometers to 2,500 kilometers, or more than 1,550 miles. The arsenal constitutes a threat to various Israeli targets both in the shipping lanes adjacent to Yemen and in Israeli territory.⁵

³ Fabian Hinz, "Little and large missile surprises in Sanaa and Tehran," *International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, October 17th, 2023.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For further information, see the March 2023 ITIC report, "The Houthi Movement and the War in Yemen: Development and Significance."



Right: A Toofan missile, which is capable of reaching Israeli territory. Left: A Tankil shore-to-sea missile (YouTube channel of the Houthi government's al-Iman TV, September 21, 2023)



A Volcano-2 medium-range ballistic missile. The Arabic reads, "We will continue military operations against the oppression of the Palestinian people until the Israeli aggression against Gaza stops" (Twitter account of the Houthi military media, November 2, 2023).

Attacks on Israel

▶ On October 19, 2023, Houthi military forces launched five cruise missiles and about thirty UAVs at the Red Sea region and Israel. The United States Navy USS Carney, stationed in the Red Sea, intercepted all the hostile aircraft and four cruise missiles. A fifth missile was intercepted by Saudi Arabian forces after it entered the country's airspace (Wall Street Journal, October 24, 2023). On October 22, 2023, **Abd al-Aziz bin Haptour, the prime minister of Yemen's Houthi government**, officially claimed responsibility for launching the missiles and aircraft, stating they were aimed at Israel and claiming some had hit their targets. In addition, he threatened that If Israeli operations against the Gaza Strip continued Israeli

vessels would be attacked in the Red Sea and off the coast of Yemen (Middle East Monitor, October 23, 2023).

► On the morning of October 27, 2023, two UAVs penetrated Egyptian airspace. One crashed into a building near a hospital in the town of Taba on the Egypt-Israel border; the other was intercepted and parts of it fell in the area of the town of Nuweibaa. The spokesman for the Egyptian army, Colonel Gharib Abdel-Hafez, reported that both aircraft had been launched from the south of the Red Sea (Reuters, October 28, 2023). An "Egyptian military official" in the Sinai Peninsula, who spoke anonymously, said that the aircraft that crashed in Taba had been intercepted by Israeli Air Force planes while it was in Egyptian airspace (al-Araby, October 28, 2023).

► The Houthi authorities did not claim responsibility for the missile and UAV launches, however, **Hezam al-Asad**, a member of the Houthi movement's political apparatus and Shura Council, tweeted the lone word "Eilat" on his Twitter account (Hezam al-Asad's Twitter account, October 27, 2023). On the evening of October 27, 2023, the IDF spokesman reported that the Israeli Air Force had eliminated "an aerial threat in the Red Sea area." According to an Israeli foreign minister announcement, the missiles and UAVs were launched by the Houthis to attack Israel. The announcement also noted their connections with Iran, Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas (Ynet, October 27, 2023).

► On October 31, 2023, a ballistic missile and two cruise missiles were fired from the Red Sea towards Israel. The ballistic missile was intercepted by Israel's Hetz 2 aerial defense system, and the cruise missiles were intercepted by Israeli Air Force planes. All the missiles were intercepted outside Israel's airspace (IDF spokesman, October 31, 2023). A few hours after the launches, **Yahya Sarieh, spokesman for the Houthi security forces**, claimed the Houthi forces had carried out a "broad attack" on Israeli targets in a show of support for the Palestinian people. He said ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and UAVs had been directed at various targets in Israel. He said it was the third attack carried out by the Houthi forces in support of the Palestinian people, thereby also claiming responsibility for the previous two attacks. He threatened the attacks would continue as long as the "Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip" continued (al-Masirah, October 31, 2023).

► **Muhammad al-Bakhiti, a member of the Houthi political bureau**, said in an interview that the leader of the Houthis, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, had ordered the launching of missiles after Israel's "ground aggression" in the Gaza Strip and after the United States'

threats against Yemen. He claimed they had launched a large number of ballistic missiles and UAVs, but Israel only reported the downing of one missile and hid the rest. He also claimed the United States was complicit in the "aggression" against the Gaza Strip and was crossing the red lines set by Yemen. (al-Mayadeen, October 31, 2023).

► On the night of October 31, 2032, the IDF's air defense intercepted an "air threat" detected in the Red Sea area south of Eilat. No penetration of Israeli airspace was detected (IDF spokesman, November 1, 2023). It was probably another attack carried out by the Houthi forces.

► **Yahya Sarieh, spokesman for the armed forces of the Houthis in Yemen,** announced they had launched "a series of UAVs at several targets deep in the Zionist entity in occupied Palestine and had hit their targets." He also stated the armed forces of Yemen would continue their activities in support of the Palestinian cause until the "aggression in the Gaza Strip" ended (Yahia Sarieh's Telegram channel, November 1, 2023).



Right: Leader of the Houthi movement Abd al-Malik al-Houthi (al-Masirah Telegram account, Houthi media wing, January 30, 2023). Left: USS Carney intercepts the Houthi attack, October 19 (US Central Command Naval Forces Facebook account, October 21, 2023)



The scene of the fall of the Houthi aircraft in the town of Tabā in the northern Sinai Peninsula (al-Arabiya Twitter account, October 27, 2023)

Additional reactions to events

▶ The events took place in the wake of threats by Houthi and Iranian elements, which began as soon as Operation Iron Swords was put in motion. According to the threats, continued Israeli activity in the Gaza Strip would result in a reaction against Israel and the United States from the "axis of resistance." On October 7, 2023, the Houthi movement issued a statement claiming that the Yemeni people supported Hamas and the Palestinian "resistance," and was prepared to participate in the battle to defend "Palestine" (al-Masirah Telegram channel, October 7, 2023). On October 10, 2023, the leader of the Houthi movement, **Abd al-Malik al-Houthi**, issued a statement on the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese al-Manar TV channel claiming Yemen was ready to respond should the United States intervene directly in the war between Israel and Hamas. He stated that the Houthis fully coordinated with their allies and were ready to respond by sending soldiers to the battlefield or by attacking with missiles, UAVs and other means (al-Manar, October 10, 2023). On October 17, 2023, Channel 1 of Iranian state television broadcast a speech by **Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran**, warning that if Israel's operations in Gaza did not stop, "the resistance groups will lose their patience and no one will be able to stop them" (IRNA, October 17, 2023).

▶ The information office of the Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) published a poster in Hebrew and Arabic threatening to attack Dimona with the caption "We will not hesitate" (Twitter account of Iran in al-Arabia, October 31, 2023).

▶ The **Jordanian authorities** contacted the Houthis, Hezbollah and the Hamas leadership to ensure the security of Jordan's airspace during the campaign between Israel and Gaza, especially when the Houthis try to intervene and send missiles to attack Israeli territory. Jordan reportedly made it clear to the Houthis that a rocket sent to attack Israel could endanger the adjacent Jordanian territories, and Jordan would not hesitate to use all the means at its disposal to deal with missiles that might cross its territory (Rai al-Youm, October 1, 2023).⁶

▶ **Mo'az Abu Shamala, the Hamas representative in Yemen**, stated that Hamas welcomed the "jihadist action" of the armed Yemeni forces, which included the launch of a ballistic missile and a UAV at Israel. He said the "partnership" would "confuse and distract" Israel and contribute to reducing the pressure on the Gaza Strip. He added that the Yemeni

⁶ <https://www.raialyoum.com/>

people sent the message that they were part of the "axis of resistance" and the geographical distance from Palestine did not bother them (SABA Telegram channel, November 1, 2023).

▶ **Muhammad al-Bakhiti, a member of the Houthi political bureau**, said that the Houthis were in a state of open war with "the Zionist entity" and claimed their motives were "humanitarian and moral in accordance with the values of the Qur'an [sic]." He added that they would continue the activity against Israel to "stop its aggression against our Palestinian brothers" (Muhammad al-Bahiti's Twitter account, November 1, 2023).