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Israel's Calculations in Responding to the Houthis

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February 4, 2025

Cover photo: Drones displayed at an exhibition organized by the Houthi group in Sana'a city on December 18, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo.

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Tit-for-tat operations have seen a surge in missile and drone attacks launched by the Houthis toward Israel as part of what the group calls the fifth phase of escalation in support of Gaza. The conflict has cast a wide net over both parties and continues to evolve gradually. Israel has carried out retaliatory airstrikes inside Yemen in response to Houthi attacks. Yet the efficacy of their airstrikes thus far has failed to have any tangible impact, as the Houthis have gained considerable experience in withstanding aerial targeting in recent years.

The nature of Israeli targets in Yemen also differs significantly from those struck by the United States and the United Kingdom. While US and UK strikes have predominantly focused on military targets, such as mobile missile launchers, radar sites, weapons storage facilities, and workshops for manufacturing missiles and drones, Israel has hit a broader range of targets, including economic infrastructure. Israeli forces have targeted the ports of Hudaydah and Al-Salif, oil storage facilities in Ras Issa, and power stations in Hudaydah and Sana'a. They also struck Sana'a International Airport and targeted eight of the port of Hudaydah's 15 tugboats, which are used to maneuver large vessels. On January 10, Israel expanded its targets to include the Presidential Palace in Sana'a. This suggests that Israel's constraints on the types of targets it will engage are less stringent than those of its Western allies, as numerous political and security challenges continue to grip the region.

The Strategic Dimensions of the Conflict

The Houthis have emerged as a pivotal force within the Axis of Resistance, especially following Israel's success in neutralizing Hamas and Hezbollah, the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, and the decline in operations by Iran-backed militias in Iraq. Simultaneously, Iran, anticipating further confrontation with Israel and the US, seeks to preserve the Houthis as a group capable of threatening Israeli and Western interests, including maritime shipping lanes. This makes the Houthis a valuable asset to Tehran as a line of defense. Iran's concerns have intensified with the return of President Trump to office, who carried out a maximum pressure strategy against Iran during his first term. Israel, meanwhile, may see an opportunity to strike Iran directly in the future, assuming backing from the Trump administration, and will undoubtedly exploit escalating tensions with the Houthis to underscore the threat posed by Iranian influence in the region. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has asserted that Israel's operations against the Houthis not only protect Israel from the Iran-backed rebel group but also the world at large.

The conflict between Israel and the Houthis has taken on multiple strategic dimensions. For Israel, it's a matter of safeguarding national security and economic interests threatened by Houthi activities. The Houthis, conversely, have leveraged the conflict to bolster their image as a resistance movement confronting both Israel and the United States. Iran, meanwhile, strategically utilizes the Houthis to project regional influence, impose significant costs on its adversaries, and enhance its leverage in diplomatic negotiations.

The exchanges of strikes between Israel and Houthis are gradually evolving into a war of attrition, a prolonged conflict that benefits neither side. Beyond the security and political implications, this protracted conflict is inflicting significant economic damage on both the Houthis and Israel. The Houthis are losing vital financial resources as their infrastructure and facilities are destroyed. Conversely, Israel incurs substantial costs to intercept Houthi missiles and drones.

Challenges Facing Israeli Operations

There is a divergence of opinions within Israel regarding the appropriate response to the Houthis in Yemen. A review of comments by Israeli experts and officials in both Israeli and international media gives an indication of how the conflict may evolve in the future. Dr. Nachum Shiloh, a research fellow at Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC), has suggested that "the Houthis may be making calculations figuring that they can sustain an Israeli retribution once every few months while continuing to attack Israel,» noting the complexity of conducting airstrikes in Yemen, which is some 2,000 km away. Shiloh concludes, "In their cost-benefit analysis, [the Houthis] want to implement their anti-Israeli, anti-American ideology while taking into account that Israel's ability to hit them is limited," adding that "Yemen's impoverished population and under-developed economy make for very few valuable military targets to Israel."

The geographical distance and exorbitant costs are not the sole challenges confronting Israeli operations in Yemen. Differing views among Israeli policymakers persist here too. Director of Mossad, David Barnea, has proposed directly targeting Iran in response to Houthi attacks. Israeli military intelligence favors a more restrained approach, arguing against direct strikes on Iran. Netanyahu appears to lean towards the assessment of military intelligence.

Beyond geographical constraints and exorbitant costs, Israeli operations in Yemen face significant intelligence challenges. Despite the Houthis' prolonged activity, it would seem that Israel has historically prioritized other threats and has not invested heavily in intelligence gathering on the Houthis. While Netanyahu has vowed to target Houthi leadership, and Defense Minister Israel Katz has declared, «We will hunt down all of the Houthis' leaders, and we will strike them just as we have done in other places," the paucity of reliable intelligence remains a significant hurdle. Yemen's underdeveloped communications infrastructure also serves as a hindrance to Israel's intelligence-gathering capabilities. Ironically, this deficiency has become a crucial element of the Houthis' defensive strategy. Israel has utilized communication surveillance in its conflicts with Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, in Yemen, where the communication infrastructure is weak and internet speeds are slow, this approach is less effective.

Beyond direct military action, Israeli policymakers are exploring an alternative strategy centered on building an international coalition encompassing Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other regional players. This approach

recognizes that the Houthi threat transcends Israel's national security interests and poses a regional challenge. To this end, the Israeli Foreign Ministry is actively lobbying for international designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization. Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar has instructed Israeli diplomats in Europe to secure this designation from as many governments as possible. While Israel, the United States, Canada, Australia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, New Zealand, and Malaysia have already designated the Houthis as a terrorist entity, only a limited number of European nations have done so.

There is also a disagreement among Israeli security experts on how to categorize the Houthis: as a state or as a terrorist organization. Giora Eiland, former head of the Israeli National Security Council, advocates for considering the Houthis as a state, given their control over the capital, Sana'a, and large swathes of northern Yemen. He argues that this would allow Israel to apply conventional laws of war and justify broader military operations. However, this view has raised concerns about regional alliances, as potential allies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE might hesitate to support an outright war against a neighboring state. Some prefer to maintain the Houthis' designation as a terrorist organization within Israel's broader framework of countering Iranian proxies to avoid alienating international allies.

A New Reality

The confrontation between the Houthis and Israel marks a new development in the region's intricate and expansive conflict. While Israel undeniably possesses far superior capabilities, the Houthis have thus far managed to sustain themselves as a significant short- and long-term threat. Israel has yet to find a silver bullet to unilaterally resolve the conflict. It appears both parties will continue to refine and bolster their strategies. The recent engagements are far from the final chapter of this complex confrontation – both sides seem locked in a costly war of attrition, the outcome of which remains uncertain unless new factors emerge to significantly alter the prevailing dynamics.

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This analysis is part of a series of publications produced by the Sana'a Center and funded by the government of the Kingdom of The Netherlands. The series explores issues within economic, political, and environmental themes, aiming to inform discussion and policymaking related to Yemen that foster sustainable peace. Views expressed within should not be construed as representing the Sana'a Center or the Dutch government.

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