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FEATURE ARTICLE

Assessing the Houthi War Effort

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Colonel (Ret.) Miri Eisin

DIRECTOR, INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE
FOR COUNTER-TERRORISM

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FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Michael Knights provides a highly detailed assessment of the six-month Houthi war effort that has seen the Tehran-backed group launch missiles at Israel and attack shipping off the coasts of Yemen. He assesses that: "The Houthis have used the Gaza crisis to vault into the front ranks of the Iran-led 'Axis of Resistance,' arguably as the only axis partner to truly globalize the conflict through their anti-shipping attacks on the approaches to the Suez Canal. The movement has demonstrated boldness—as the first axis member to fire ballistic missiles at Israel—and resilience in the face of U.S.-U.K. airstrikes. The Houthis are likely to emerge from the war as a more confident, ambitious, and aggressive terrorist army, with a taste for provocative and eye-catching acts of defiance against Israel and the United States."

Our interview is with Colonel (Ret.) Miri Eisin, the director of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University who previously served in a variety of senior intelligence roles in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). She stresses the need to learn lessons from the intelligence failures that preceded the Hamas-led October 7 attack so that Israel is not surprised again, for example with regard to the kind of threat Hezbollah could pose in the coming months. "All of us made wrong assumptions, and the combination of all of them brought about a colossal failure," she says. "We collectively were wrong about the capability. We were wrong about the intentions. We were wrong about the ferocity."

Kévin Jackson assesses the current state of al-Qa`ida Central. He writes that "while the challenges facing the group are real, it should not be written off, as it has proved time and again more resilient than expected." He adds that "in the wake of the Gaza war, al-Qa`ida likely feels emboldened by what it perceives as a uniquely auspicious geopolitical context to further its global ambitions."

The African Union is set to withdraw the remainder of its forces from Somalia by December 31, 2024. Paul Williams evaluates whether the Somali National Army (SNA) or al-Shabaab would be stronger militarily if this happens. He writes that "the SNA would retain an advantage in terms of size, material resources, and external support but performs poorly on non-material dimensions and would remain dependent upon external finance and security assistance. Overall, however, al-Shabaab would be slightly militarily stronger because of its significant advantages across the non-material dimensions related to force employment, cohesion, and psychological operations, as well as the sustainability of its forces."

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Cover: Armed rebels of the Iran-backed Houthi militia take part in a demonstration against the United States and Israel on January 29, 2024, in Sanaa, Yemen. (Osamah Yahya/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

Assessing the Houthi War Effort Since October 2023

By Michael Knights

The Houthis have used the Gaza crisis to vault into the front ranks of the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance,” arguably as the only axis partner to truly globalize the conflict through their anti-shipping attacks on the approaches to the Suez Canal. The movement has demonstrated boldness—as the first axis member to fire ballistic missiles at Israel—and resilience in the face of U.S.-U.K. airstrikes. The Houthis are likely to emerge from the war as a more confident, ambitious, and aggressive terrorist army, with a taste for provocative and eye-catching acts of defiance against Israel and the United States.

The military development of the Houthi movement^{1a} has been examined in detail by the author in two previous *CTC Sentinel* pieces that this article will build upon. The first, in September 2018, was an analysis² of the military evolution of the movement, noting the group’s very rapid five-year development from an insurgent group fielding roadside bombs to a state-level actor using Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles.³ In a second analysis⁴ published in October 2022, the author (along with Adnan al-Gabarni and Casey Coombs) provided an in-depth profile of “the Houthi political-military leadership, its core motivations, and the nature and extent of Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah influence within the movement.”⁵ Taken together, the two studies painted a picture of a rapidly evolving military force, growing more centralized and cohesive, in part due to close mentoring from Lebanese Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

This study will take forward (data cut-off April 24, 2024) the analysis of the military development of the Houthi movement, formally known as Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), who are (since February 17, 2024) once again sanctioned by the United States

a Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells noted that the Houthis are known by a variety of names: “the ‘Houthis’ (al-Houthiyin), the ‘Houthi movement’ (al-Haraka al-Houthiya), ‘Houthist elements’ (al-‘anasir al-Houthiya), ‘Houthi supporters’ (Ansar al-Houthi), or ‘Believing Youth Elements’ (‘Anasir al-Shabab al-Mu’min).” Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Houthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2010).

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for terrorism.^b The analysis will draw on open-source reporting of Houthi military activities, which includes vast amounts of social media and broadcast media imagery from Yemen, both from before the current Gaza conflict and since the war began. Supplementing this, the analysis will also draw on historical data regarding the Houthi war machine in the post-2015 Yemeni civil war and the assistance it has drawn from Iran and Hezbollah. Official statements, global media, and Yemeni reporting of the Anglo-American military strikes on the Houthis since January 12, 2024, add another piece of the puzzle. Some data has been drawn from contacts in Yemen with extensive on-the-ground access in Houthi-held areas.

The paper starts by examining the strategic and operational environment facing the Houthi movement on October 6, 2023, the day before the current Gaza crisis began. This includes a review of the territory held by the movement, the military balance vis-à-vis the anti-Houthi factions, internal security and economic challenges, and the evolving Houthi role in the Saudi-mediated peace process to end the civil war. The section thereafter will review the Houthi military mobilization during the post-October 2023 Gaza crisis, including strikes on Israel and the opening months of the Houthi campaign against Israel-linked shipping in the Red Sea. The analysis will then turn to the impact that U.S. strikes from January 12, 2024, have had on the Houthi war effort and the military balance inside Yemen. This section will review the wartime evolution of Houthi anti-shipping operations and force preservation efforts. The analysis closes with a review of what observers can learn about the Houthi war machine from the events since October 2023: the movement’s strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities

b On January 19, 2021, the outgoing Trump administration designated the Houthi organizational institution Ansar Allah as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO), a step that the Biden administration almost immediately revoked on February 16, 2021. Since then, some Houthi leaders remained covered by older sanctions (and additional Houthi military leaders continue to be added to U.S. sanctions lists) for posing a “threat to the peace, security, or stability of Yemen.” Then on January 17, 2024, the Biden administration re-designated the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity but not as an FTO, a difference that enables easier access for humanitarian organizations and peace negotiators when the designation went into effect on February 17, 2024. For the newest SDGT designation, see “Terrorist Designation of the Houthis: Press Statement by Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State,” U.S. Department of State, January 17, 2024. For the prior sanctions, see “Revocation of the Terrorist Designations of Ansarallah,” U.S. Department of State, February 12, 2021. The U.S. government noted: “Ansarallah leaders Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim remain sanctioned under E.O. 13611 related to acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen.” See also “Treasury Sanctions Key Military Leaders of the Ansarallah Militia in Yemen,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 2, 2021; “Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Official Overseeing Group’s Offensive Operations,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 20, 2021; “Treasury Targets Key Houthi Finance Network in Coordination with Regional Gulf Partners,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 23, 2022.

and threats that face the Houthis in the coming months and years. The October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* piece posited that Houthis had achieved their aim of becoming a “southern Hezbollah,” and this analysis aims to paint a well-evidenced picture of how this new southern Hezbollah has fought in the Gaza conflict since October 2023.⁶

The Houthi’s Strategic and Operational Environment on October 6, 2023

As noted in the October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* article, the territories and the populations controlled by the Houthis increased exponentially during their 2014–2015 military expansion at the start of the current civil war.⁷ By the author’s rough calculation using online mapping tools, the Houthi frontline expanded from about 700 kilometers in early 2014 to over 1,500 kilometers by the summer of 2015 and 1,700 kilometers by October 2023.⁸ The area occupied by Houthi forces increased from around 30,000 square kilometers in 2014 to 120,000 square kilometers in 2015, stabilizing at 110,000 square kilometers when the frontlines froze from 2018–2023.⁹ The population controlled by the Houthis rose by an order of magnitude, from little more than two to three million at the start of 2014 to 20–24 million (by U.S. government calculations) by 2023.^c Regime security—balancing internal control against manning the largely inactive frontlines—has been the overriding concern of the Houthi movement since the U.N.-brokered Stockholm Agreement froze major fighting in December 2018.¹⁰

Heavily populated, poor, mountainous, and fiercely tribal, northern Yemen is difficult for anyone to rule, including the Houthis.¹¹ Controlling 60–70 percent of Yemen’s population¹² but with only a small fraction of pre-war national income,^d the Houthi-run Sanaa government has been unable to pay more than a sixth of owed salaries to important classes of civil servants (such as teachers) for the last seven years.^e This has resulted in escalating pickets and public sector strikes in urban areas.^{13f} The war economy in Houthi areas has driven a brutal cannibalization of remaining assets, often not for the benefit of the broader population but for

the powerful Houthi “supervisors”⁸ embedded in each government department and district administration.^h Property seizures, enforced *zakat* (religious taxes), and the channeling of trucking and fuel allocation contracts to Houthi-aligned businesses have increased dissatisfaction across society in the Houthi-held areas.¹⁴

As a counter to growing opposition, Houthi leader Abdalmalik Badr al-Din al-Huthi is part-way through a kind of cultural revolution that is now gathering pace, nine years into Houthi control of the capital.¹⁵ One tool has been repression against professionals¹⁶ⁱ and businessmen,^j and efforts to replace Yemeni republican and secular symbols (such as Revolution Day on September 26).^k Tribal violence toward Houthi authorities^l—and to a lesser extent between rival Houthi powerbases^m—has surged at the ragged edges of the Houthi enclave, such as Hajjah, Bayda, and

c The State Department’s 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom stated that in 2022, “the Houthis continued to control approximately one-third of the country’s territory, including 70 to 80 percent of the population.” With the U.S. CIA World Fact Book putting Yemen’s population at 33.7 million, this results in 20–24 million persons under Houthi control. See “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Yemen Office of International Religious Freedom,” U.S. Department of State, 2023.

d The Houthis are likely to control under \$2 billion in annual income. See Michael Knights, “An Heir and a Spare? How Yemen’s ‘Southern Hezbollah’ Could Change Iran’s Deterrent Calculus,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2023.

e It was reported: “The last stable payments to teachers came in 2016. Since then, only partial payments have been made.” In 2022, the Houthis made payments to teachers once every six months, each equivalent to one month’s pre-war pay. Author’s subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons.

f Public servants in Houthi-controlled regions are now owed over five years of back pay. Details gathered from interviews with Yemen-watchers from the humanitarian, government and U.S. and U.K. think-tank communities for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

g The Houthi set up local supervisors (*mushrifeen*) across all districts in Yemen and within all ministries and major military units, akin to a political commissar system of surveillance and parallel authority. See Adnan Al-Jabrani, “Who are the Houthis? The hidden structures and key leaders who actually run the organization,” Almasdar Online, 2022.

h Houthi supervisors have responded to growing austerity by redistributing wealth through mass confiscation of properties owned by factional rivals or associates of the internationally recognized government; by imposing taxes, including mandatory religious taxes (*zakat*); and by centralizing contract awards and humanitarian access in ways that channel remaining contracts and paid work toward Houthi supporters. Details gathered from interviews with Yemen-watchers from the humanitarian, government and U.S. and U.K. think-tank communities for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

i In particular, the most targeted sectors of the professional community are professors, judges, teachers, civil society activists, humanitarian workers, and retired generals. Details gathered from interviews with Yemen-watchers from the humanitarian, government, and U.S. and U.K. think-tank communities for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

j The Judicial Guard was set up by the Houthis to confiscate properties and businesses, and this organization has been used to target businesses who are not protected by some connection to the Houthi movement. This is headed by Major General Saleh Mesfer Farhan Alshaer, “a close ally of Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi [who also] serves as both the commander of the Houthi-controlled military logistics support organization, where he assisted the Houthis in acquiring smuggled weapons, as well as the officer responsible for managing all assets and funds confiscated by the Houthis.” “Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Officer Overseeing Group’s Seizure of Opposition Property,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 18, 2021.

k Significant arrests were made in the run-up to the Revolution Day on September 26, 2023, the annual commemoration of the republican forces’ victory over Yemen’s last religious imamate in 1962. Flag selling and flag waving was punished with beatings and arrests, and the Houthis also closed down popular social media services like Zoom and Google Meet on the anniversary. Instead, the Houthis had sought to make Prophet Mohammad’s birthday (celebrated in September) more extravagant as a means to overshadow September 26. Author’s subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons.

l A close review of reporting over an extended period (August to March 2024) shows the Houthi supervisors and local forces clashing violently with tribes in all of the Houthi-held provinces outside of their home districts of Saada and Amran. The most intense and sustained clashes have occurred in Al-Jawf, Al-Bayda, Hajjar, Ibb, and Sanaa. Author’s subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons.

m A review of open source reporting from August to March 2024 showed intra-Houthi killings of mid-level commanders in Sanaa, Saada, Ibb, Al-Bayda, Hajjar, Al-Jawf, and Taizz.



Yemen (Rowan Technology)

al-Jawf. Alongside repression, the Houthi leadership is increasing popular mobilization and indoctrination as a means of reducing resistance to Houthi misrule. In the field of mobilization, as the October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* article explored in depth,¹⁷ the Houthis have invested significant effort in developing a comprehensive military human resources system¹⁸ with the Houthis claiming a mobilization capacity of 708,000 personnel before the Gaza conflict.^o This is run (as a formal government institution) by the Ministry of Defense General Mobilization Authority (GMA),^p which is itself led by the Houthi Jihad Preparation Official (aka the Official of the Central Committee for Recruitment and Mobilization), Abdul Rahim al-Humran.¹⁹ The Jihad Preparation Official also leads a parallel mobilization reserve, the Houthi Basij Logistics and

Support Brigades, akin to Iran's Basij forces.^q In a demonstration of the ability of mobilization potential, the September 21, 2023, coup anniversary saw what the Houthi-controlled SABA news agency claimed to be "around 35,000 from various military formations" participating in the military parade.²⁰

Alongside mobilization, the Houthis are also using mass indoctrination programs to replicate IRGC and Hezbollah methods of militarizing their society and creating the infrastructure for permanent mobilization. As the October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* article noted,²¹ the Houthi "Spiritual Guidance Department" has now been active for almost a decade, and its younger soldiers were just small children when the Houthis seized Sanaa in 2014.²² As a result, the *CTC Sentinel* piece calculated, most military-age Yemenis cannot remember a time before Houthi propaganda, which to this day is headlined by the slogan (or the scream (*al-shi'ar*): "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam."²³ Numerous groups—tribal members, teachers and professors, students, and even captured al-Qa`ida fighters—have been cycled through an intensifying program of cultural reeducation courses run by Ansar Allah.^r

The final key aspect of the strategic environment of the Houthis

n The October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* study notes that the Houthi governorate supervisors, "neighborhood affairs managers," and "neighborhood sheikhs" comb households for military-age males and maintain an updated military human resources system. Knights, al-Gabarni, and Coombs, "The Houthi Jihad Council: Command and Control in 'the Other Hezbollah,'" *CTC Sentinel* 15:10 (2022).

o Navanti Group analyst Mohammed Al-Basha noted that in February 2024, the Houthis announced their trained reserve had reached 873,123 personnel and that this number had grown by 165,429 since October 7, 2023. This suggests their claimed number for the mobilization reserve was 707,694 in October 2023. See Mohammed Al-Basha, "#Yemen: In February 2024, Abdul Malik Al Houthi announced that the total number . . .," X, February 22, 2024.

p As the author (plus al-Gabarni and Coombs) noted in 2022, the General Mobilization Authority (GMA) is the arm of the Defense Ministry used to mobilize an estimated 130,000 recruits from the poorer segments of society, for whom even the minimal salary of around \$30 per month is preferable to complete poverty. Knights, al-Gabarni, and Coombs, "The Houthi Jihad Council: Command and Control in 'the Other Hezbollah,'" *CTC Sentinel* 15:10 (2022).

q This is a parallel mobilization reserve force run by the Jihad Preparation Official and akin to Iran's Basij forces. These brigades are being developed by Qasim al-Humran (aka Abu Kawthar), who previously oversaw the Ministry of Youth and Sports. See Knights, al-Gabarni, and Coombs.

r Author's subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons. The aforementioned eight-month review from August to March 2024 shows sheikhs, tribal fighters, students, professors, and even doctors being removed from their daily lives and duties to be enrolled in 45-day indoctrination courses. The same reporting describes al-Qa`ida fighters reeducated in indoctrination courses held by the Houthis prior to release.

on the eve of the Gaza war was the status of the U.N.-backed peace process that has ebbed and flowed since the 2018 Stockholm Agreement.²⁴ Within that process, the Houthis had decidedly gained the upper hand²⁵ over the internationally recognized government and its Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), in part due to very strong Saudi Arabian and U.S. keenness to end the Yemen war.⁵ Despite the ceasefire, the Houthis continued to make strenuous efforts to seize the country's main oil and gas hub at Marib until they were fought to an exhausted standstill in January 2022.²⁶

Thereafter, the Houthis moved into negotiating mode, using ongoing saber-rattling to threaten to derail the peace process.²⁷ In addition to mobilizing ever greater numbers of military reservists,²⁸ the Houthis also used their leverage (i.e., greater determination to continue the fight than the PLC's Gulf partners) to push their advantage in the peace negotiations.¹ Houthi drone attacks in October 2022 shut down the internationally recognized government's oil exports and much of their customs revenues.²⁹ Punitive Houthi taxation of inbound trucks at the internal border with the PLC areas further damaged the PLC-held ports.³⁰ The Houthis successfully leveraged the potential crisis of the deteriorating oil tanker, the FSO Safer, moored at the main Houthi port of Hodeida, as a bargaining chip in financial negotiations.^u

The Houthis also held their April 2022 cessation of missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia at risk.^v At the September 21, 2023, parades, the Houthis showed off their increasing military power, should hostilities recommence, including new classes of Iran-provided medium-range ballistic missiles capable of striking Israel (as well as all of the territories of the Gulf Cooperation Council states) and also new Iran-provided anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), and one-way attack drones.³¹

As the Hamas attack on Israel unfolded on October 7, 2023, the Houthis thus faced a dichotomous strategic environment: On the one hand, the movement faced no real prospect of military defeat in the civil war, with increasing evidence pointing to an advantageous and confident Houthi position in the peace process. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE was prepared to restart its military support to the PLC,³² and the United States sought a rapid conclusion to the war in order to roll into a planned trilateral normalization deal

involving Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.³³ At the same time, the Houthis sat atop a collapsed economy and were entirely reliant on a Saudi-funded economic bailout to reduce growing societal tension in the Houthi areas.³⁴ A new conflict, the preferred environment for the primarily military Houthi leadership,³⁵ could thus not have been better-timed or more convenient as a way to further militarize the society, demonstrate Houthi military strength at a key moment in the Saudi-backed peace negotiations, and distract Houthi citizenry from worsening economic and political conditions.^w

The Post October 7 Houthi Campaign

Houthi War Aims

Within the broader "axis of resistance"³⁶—comprising Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran-backed militias in Iraq,^x and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, among others—the Houthis were still less-recognized newcomers to the top-table of Iranian partner forces. The author's October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* article (alongside al-Gabarni and Coombs) argued that this was largely an inaccurate view.³⁷ Instead, based on the authors' detailed review of Houthi relations with Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah since the 1980s, the Houthi relationship with these founding members of the axis of resistance was "arguably that of a strong, deep-rooted alliance that is underpinned by tight ideological affinity and geopolitical alignment.³⁸ As the Houthi slogan—"Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam"³⁹—suggests, the movement had been seeking to become an important player in the axis' wars against Israel since at least 2001, when the second intifada was gathering force in Palestinian areas.⁴⁰

It was thus not surprising that the Houthis would enthusiastically join other axis of resistance actors—including mentors like Iran and Hezbollah^y—in aiding Hamas after October 7. One Houthi war aim was arguably to screen not only Hamas but also Hezbollah from enemy action. Houthi leader Abdalmalik al-Huthi announced on October 10 that the Houthis would join the conflict if the United States did, part of the axis effort to shield Hezbollah and Iran from direct U.S. pressure.^z On October 31, as the Houthis launched

s There are many indicators of Riyadh's determination: Saudi Arabia first offered its own unilateral ceasefire with the Houthis, then unilateral prisoner releases of Houthi prisoners of war, then held direct peace talks with them, including in Riyadh. Mohammed Hatem and Sam Dagher, "Saudi Arabia Pushes for End to Yemen War After Iran Détente," Bloomberg, April 9, 2023.

t The Houthis regularly bring up the possibility of returning to general warfare, including with strikes into Saudi Arabia, using these threats to drive up their negotiating price: to be not one of many factions at the peace table but equivalent to the internationally recognized government; to have Houthi salaries paid by Saudi Arabia for six months; to gain concessions in the loosening of the naval blockade and the return of some flights to Sanaa airport; and so on.

u The Houthis adopted a maximalist position in which they would either receive the oil on the FSO Safer or equivalent financial recompense. See Frank Giustra, "There's a decrepit supertanker off the coast of Yemen — it's another Exxon Valdez disaster just waiting to happen," *Toronto Star*, February 7, 2023.

v As recently as March 25, 2024, deep into the Saudi-Houthi peace process, the president of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, Mohammed Ali al-Huthi, threatened to resume attacks on Saudi Arabia if the Kingdom continued hosting U.S. military aircraft. See "Houthis threaten Saudi Arabia's oil installations for 'supporting US aggression,'" S&P Global Commodity Insights, March 25, 2024.

w This point was well-made by Gregory Johnsen, who wrote "The Houthis view the war between Israel and Hamas as an opportunity to mute some of this domestic criticism. If they are attacking Israel, their local rivals will be less inclined to attack them." See Gregory D. Johnsen, "The Houthi War on Israel," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, November 8, 2023.

x On November 25, 2023, the U.S.-designated Kataib Hezbollah movement listed itself as belonging to the Islamic Resistance in Iraq and added "the Mujahedin brothers who participated in military jihad operations" since October 7 included Iraqi groups Ansar Allah al-Awfiya, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN), Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), and KH. See Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, "Militia Hair-Pulling Over Who Are 'The Truest Muqawama,'" Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 26, 2023.

y The October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* article paints a detailed picture of Houthi relations with Iran (almost that of a parent) and Lebanese Hezbollah (akin to an idolized older brother). Knights, al-Gabarni, and Coombs.

z Abdalmalik al-Huthi noted: "We will not hesitate to do everything we can and everything we have in our hands, and we are in complete coordination with the Axis of Resistance to do everything we can ... If the US directly intervenes, we are ready to participate with missile strikes, drones, and other military options." Author's subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons.

their first ballistic missile strike on Israel,^{41 aa} the Houthi military spokesman, Yahya Sarea, confirmed that attacks on Israel would be sustained as long as Israeli operations in Gaza continued, again serving the aim of the axis to shorten Israel's window of action against Hamas.⁴² At a minimum, therefore, Houthi war aims included commitment to the mutual defense of other axis of resistance members.

More interesting in the author's view, the Houthis committed themselves to entering into open war with the Israelis to an extent that no other non-Palestinian member of the axis did, with little apparent fear of an Israeli response.⁴³ Thus, while Iran did not directly attack Israel until April 13, 2024 (i.e., for 189 days since October 7, 2023),⁴⁴ the Houthis (with direct Iranian support^{ab}) commenced direct cruise missile and drone on Israeli territory from October 19.⁴⁵ Iraqi militias commenced attacks from Iraq and Syria on U.S. bases from October 17 (following the Gaza Al-Ahli Hospital explosion^{46 ac} and the related furor sweeping the Arab world⁴⁷), but there is little indication (and no claims) that Iraqi members of the axis struck Israel itself until November 2, 2023.⁴⁸ While Lebanese Hezbollah shielded itself from powerful Israeli retaliation by sticking as close as possible to the "rules of the game" (i.e., shallow and small attacks within the border zone, and no deeper attacks on cities or strategic infrastructure),⁴⁹ the Houthis threw their best shots at Israel from the beginning, seemingly (to the author) accepting no rules at all.

Two decades of war against Yemeni and Gulf Arab armed forces partially explains Houthi risk-acceptance, as does Israel's relative lack of experience targeting Yemen and the distances involved (i.e., as opposed to Israeli familiarity with and closeness to Lebanon and western Syria). In addition, this author has argued,⁵⁰ an additional Houthi war aim was to become a widely recognized, *leading* player in the axis of resistance, which may help explain Houthi over-performance and above-average risk-taking (by the standards of non-Palestinian axis members) since October 2023.⁵¹

Command and Logistics in the Post-October War Effort

As the October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* article detailed,⁵² the Houthi command and control system is reasonably well-organized and generally led by experienced Houthi fighters who have received specialized training in Iran and/or Lebanon when their roles involve drone, missile, naval, logistics, preventative security, and

aa Israel intercepted the missile using an Arrow-2 interceptor system. Seth J. Frantzman, "In first, Israel's Arrow 2 air defense system intercepts ballistic missile near Red Sea: IDF," *Breaking Defense*, October 31, 2023.

ab Adm. Brad Cooper, deputy commander of U.S. Central Command, stated in mid-February: "The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps is inside Yemen, and they are serving side by side with the Houthis, advising them and providing target information . . . They're resupplying them as we sit here right now at sea. We know this is happening. They're advising them, and they're providing target information. This is crystal clear." Quoted from Norah O'Donnell, Aliza Chasan, Keith Sharman, and Roxanne Feitel, "Houthis get critical support from Iran for Red Sea attacks, U.S. Navy admiral says," *CBS, 60 Minutes*, February 15, 2024.

ac The Houthis, like the rest of the non-Palestinian axis of resistance, commenced their military attacks on Israel after the Al-Ahli Hospital explosion on October 17. Previously, axis members had said their military activities against Israel would be linked to commencement of Israeli ground operation in Gaza or the eventuality that the United States intervened—both events the axis sought to deter. In the author's view, Al-Ahli seemed to bring on the axis' military support in an unplanned manner.

“While Lebanese Hezbollah shielded itself from powerful Israeli retaliation by sticking as close as possible to the ‘rules of the game’ (i.e., shallow and small attacks within the border zone, and no deeper attacks on cities or strategic infrastructure), the Houthis threw their best shots at Israel from the beginning, seemingly (to the author) accepting no rules at all.”

intelligence-gathering functions.⁵³ Within the Houthi hierarchy, the counter-Israel and counter-shipping operations are likely to have been commanded and coordinated by the so-called Special Forces Official,^{54 ad} known only as Abu Fatima,⁵⁵ and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Jihad Assistant^{56 ac} and his Hezbollah deputy, all three of whom are on the Houthi Jihad Council.⁵⁷ Tactical control is likely to have been held by the deputy to the Special Forces Official, Naval Forces chief of staff Mansour al-Saadi, a long-standing Houthi commander on the Red Sea coast since 2015, sanctioned by the United States for “mastermind[ing] lethal attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea” after receiving specialized training in Iran.^{58 af} The “ground-holding” commander of the Houthi forces along the Red Sea coast—the cockpit for most of the operations since October 2023⁵⁹—is the U.S.-sanctioned^{ag} Major General Yusif al-Madani (Abu Husayn),^{ah} the head of the Hodeida-headquartered Fifth

ad The October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* study noted: “The Special Forces Official’s area of responsibility seems to be the Houthi units that directly draw upon Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah support, and the SFO role is closely associated with the IRGC-QF Jihad Assistant and his Hezbollah deputy and seems to work directly to the Jihad Council.” Knights, al-Gabarni, and Coombs.

ae The October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* study noted that “though the exact identity of the current Jihad Assistant is not yet publicly known, a previous IRGC-QF official to play the role was IRGC-QF Brigadier General Abdalreza Shahla’i.” Knights, al-Gabarni, and Coombs. Investigative reporter Jay Solomon suggested this was the case as recently as January 2024. See Jay Solomon, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Deployed in Yemen,” *Semafor*, January 15, 2024.

af Al-Saadi was designated by the United States for threatening the peace and security of Yemen under Executive Order 13611 on March 2, 2021. See “Treasury Sanctions Key Military Leaders of the Ansarallah Militia in Yemen.”

ag On May 20, 2021, al-Madani was sanctioned by the United States for threatening the peace, security, and stability of Yemen, followed by the United Nations on November 9, 2021. See “Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Official Overseeing Group’s Offensive Operations” and “Yusuf al-Madani,” United Nations Security Council, November 9, 2021.

ah Al-Madani spent his youth as one of the most promising students of Abdalmalik al-Huthi’s predecessor as Houthi leader, Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi, in Sa`ada. He married one of Husayn’s daughters and gained a powerful reputation as a commander in every Houthi conflict since 2004. His brother Taha al-Madani, another very senior Houthi field commander, was killed in action in 2016. Knights, al-Gabarni, and Coombs.

Military Region Command.^{ai}

Arguably one of the reasons this team of commanders was quick to react to the October 7 crisis is that the Houthis appear to have been improving the readiness and infrastructure of the Red Sea forces since the summer of 2023, possibly related to rising U.S.-Iran naval tensions in the Arabian Gulf, where Iran had made six attacks on Israeli or U.S.-linked vessels between February and July 2023.^{aj} This activity accelerated as the tensions with Iran peaked in July and August 2023, with Abdalmalik al-Huthi's confidante Mahdi al-Mashat, president of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, announcing^{ak} naval drills in the island chain off the Hodeida coast^{al} and with on-the-ground observers noticing the activation of new missile battery locations in coastal sites such as Ras Issa, Ras al-Khatib, and Al-Arj (in between the two).⁶⁰ These fast attack boat and unmanned surface vehicle (USV, drone boat) drills commenced on August 5-7,⁶¹ with Houthi political official Husayn al-Ezzi warning U.S. naval ships to avoid Yemeni territorial waters or risk "the beginning of the longest and most costly battle in human history."⁶² The exercises were repeated again on September 11,⁶³ perhaps to reinforce the warning on the anniversary of terrorist attacks on the United States. As the Gaza war began on October 7, the Houthis had (on October 4-6) just closed off the Nakhila coast (an 80-kilometer stretch of coast studded with small harbors and artificial canals) to fisherman and coastal road traffic,⁶⁴ and also Kamaran Bay (the northern side of the Ras Issa peninsula),⁶⁵ activity that on-the-ground observers correlated with landings by dhows and fishing boats to unload military supplies, most likely from Iran.⁶⁶

Targeting Israel

While Iraqi groups began their retaliation against the United States in Iraq and Syria within hours of the October 17 Gaza Al-Ahli hospital explosion,⁶⁷ it was the Houthis that led the escalation against Israel itself after the Al-Ahli incident. Lebanese Hezbollah had been skirmishing with Israel on their shared border since October 7 but did not escalate to strike Israeli cities or infrastructure, or use weapons heavier than unguided Katyusha rockets.⁶⁸ On October 19, the Houthis commenced a harassing bombardment of Israel that (in the author's assessment⁶⁹) was quite limited in scale but also unprecedented in many regards.

Nine waves of Houthi strikes against Israel in October-December

2023 can be evidenced using open-source reporting,^{70 am} ranging from the first on October 19 to the last recorded strike in 2023 on December 26.⁷¹ These include three medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) launches against Israel,^{72 an} the first-ever MRBMs to be targeted on Israel by a member of the axis of resistance, Iran included (at that point). The Houthis had only just hinted that they had the capability to reach Israel when they exposed fuselages and engines from extended-range MRBMs at the September 21, 2023, parades in Sanaa,⁷³ just a month before the war.^{ao}

The Houthis also used at least 12 Land Attack Cruise Missiles (LACM) in the October-December 2023 strikes, which the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessed to be Quds-type missiles (the Iranian 351/Paveh),^{ap} spread across five known salvos.^{aq} Finally, the Houthis threaded Sammad-2/3 one-way attack drones^{ar} into at least four of these salvos, including one attack stream with at least 15 drones and another with at least 13 drones.^{as} While *not a single one* of these 46 known⁷⁴ MRBMs, cruise missiles or drones launched by the Houthis in 2023 made it to Israel through the gauntlet of U.S., European, Arab, and Israeli air defenses,⁷⁵ it was nonetheless impressive that the Houthis could launch this many attacks at ranges of up to 1,900 kilometers at relatively short notice, imposing upon Western militaries the mass expenditure of more expensive interceptor systems by the United States, United Kingdom, and Israel.^{at} The above calculations may even be an underestimate of the number of munitions fired at Israel by the Houthis in the first months of the war because from around mid-November onward,⁷⁶ it became harder to differentiate whether all the cruise missiles and drones being fired northwards were aimed at Israel itself or against shipping in the Red Sea.

am These comprise attacks (all in 2023) on October 19, 27, and 31; November 9, 14, 22, and 25; plus December 6, 16, and 26.

an These comprised attacks (all in 2023) on October 31; and November 9 and 25.

ao The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessed at least one of the launched missiles to have been an extended-range variant of the Houthi Burkan-3/Zulfiqar, known in Iran as Qiam/Rezvan. See the declassified dossier, "Iran Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East," Defense Intelligence Agency, February 2024.

ap DIA assessed at least one of the launched missiles to have been an extended-range variant of the Quds, known in Iran as Project 351/Paveh. See "Iran Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East."

aq These comprised attacks (all in 2023) on October 19 and 31; November 22 and 25; plus December 26.

ar The Houthis seem to be using a Sammad-2 or Sammad-3 variant, which DIA assesses to be a version of the Iranian Sayyad (KAS-04) drone. No wreckage seen thus far suggests the Houthis had yet used Waid-2 delta-wing drones, which DIA assesses to be a version of the Iranian Shahed-136 drone. See "Iran Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East."

as Known Houthi drone attacks on Israel in 2023 comprised attacks on October 19 and 27; November 25; plus December 26. The October 19 attack stream included at least 15 drones and four cruise missiles, and the December 26 salvo used at least 13 drones and five cruise missiles.

at Facing large salvos, U.S., British, and other nationalities expended multiple air defense vessels' full arsenals of interceptor missiles during the conflict (known as "going Winchester"), requiring vessels to be replenished, drawing down on valuable general war stocks and generally engaging with more valuable missiles than the systems being intercepted—a form of cost-imposition on anti-Houthi forces. See Sam LaGrone, "U.S. Destroyer Used SM-2s to Down 3 Land Attack Missiles Launched from Yemen, Says Pentagon," USNI News, October 19, 2023.

ai Fifth MRC covers Hodeida, Hajjar, Al Mahawit, and Raymah governorates. The deputy commander is Hamza Abu Talib, a low-profile fighter groomed by Madani. Knights, al-Gabarni, and Coombs.

aj This included three successful seizures of vessels by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGC-N) forces and two failed efforts to undertake visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) operations against U.S.-linked ships. In this case, and all other maritime attack case studies in this article, the author uses the very useful Washington Institute online tracker by Noam Raydan and Farzin Nadimi. See Noam Raydan and Farzin Nadimi, "Tracking Maritime Attacks in the Middle East Since 2019," Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

ak This was on July 30, 2023. Author's subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons.

al The Houthi-held island chain includes (as their main bases) Taqfash, Jebel al-Tair, and possibly Zubayr. Details gathered from interviews with Yemen-watchers from the humanitarian, government and U.S. and U.K. think-tank communities for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

The Houthi Campaign Against Shipping

Houthi officials had threatened since October 22 to begin targeting Israeli-linked shipping,^{77 au} and this was confirmed for the first time by Abdalmalik al-Huthi in his November 14 speech,⁷⁸ in which he warned: “We will monitor and locate Israeli ships in the Red Sea and we will not hesitate to target them.”⁷⁹

In the author’s assessment,⁸⁰ this was a natural progression for the Houthi war effort for a number of reasons. On November 1, the leader of the axis of resistance, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, called upon the axis to answer the sieging of Gaza by blocking Israel’s exports and trade.⁸¹ As Elana DeLozier presciently noted in 2019,⁸² the Houthis have a demonstrated penchant for “eye-for-an-eye” actions of this kind, especially in terms of counter-blockading the blockader.^{83 av} The Houthis also needed a new, more sustainable option, as the strikes on Israel—as well as all being intercepted—expended the highest-end, most exquisite systems available to the Houthis: extended range MRBMs and cruise missiles.^{84 aw}

An anti-shipping war was a war the Houthis had prepared for, both in terms of the armaments they held⁸⁵ and the Iranian operational and tactical models⁸⁶ they emulated.^{87 ax} The Houthis also had a preexisting track record of striking enemy shipping in the Red Sea, largely vessels from Saudi Arabia and the UAE when these were the main combatants fighting the Houthis in Yemen’s civil war.⁸⁸

As the author’s 2018 *CTC Sentinel* study of the Houthi war machine explored in detail,⁸⁹ in 2015 Ansar Allah took control of Yemen’s Red Sea coastal missile batteries and then integrated them into an Iranian-supported salvage and modernization program.^{90 ay} Houthi coastal defense and sea denial efforts were directly modelled on Iran’s own guerrilla coastal defense tactics,⁹¹ built around land-based anti-shipping missiles, one-way attack drones, rocket- and missile-armed fast attack craft, mines, unmanned surface vehicle (USV) explosive drone boats, helicopter-borne commando boarding

teams, and combat divers.^{92 az}

Interestingly, when the Houthis commenced their new anti-shipping campaign in November 2023, their first efforts closely mirrored the “board and seize” naval commando tactics that were employed by Iran itself in February–July 2023 as Tehran attempted to seize five commercial ships in the Gulf.^{ba} As is often the case, with hindsight, the Houthis laid a very clear trail of preparations before their November 19, 2023, seizure of the *Galaxy Leader*, an Israeli-owned car carrier.^{93 bb} From about November 12 onward, the Houthis began accelerated exercising of naval commando and helicopter VBSS (visit, board, search, and seizure) operations.⁹⁴ From November 13–18, the Houthi naval forces extended their patrols in a wide net from as far south as the Somali coast to the Farasan islands off Saudi Arabia.⁹⁵ After a number of failed speedboat chases of commercial vessels on November 17–18,⁹⁶ the Houthis succeeded with *Galaxy Leader* only by using a helicopter to land commandos, who then stopped the ship to allow a Houthi boat flotilla to catch up.⁹⁷

Though an enormous propaganda victory,^{bc} the Houthis found it hard (in this author’s assessment⁹⁸) to replicate the success of *Galaxy Leader*. When a seizure was attempted on November 26 against an Israel-owned tanker *Central Park* (just south of the Bab el-Mandeb), the effort was disrupted by a U.S. naval vessel, the *USS Mason*, which was subsequently unsuccessfully targeted in an apparent first use of anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs) by the Houthis.⁹⁹ Five further efforts were made in December by the Houthis to seize a vessel in the Red Sea using refined detection^{bd}

au The then Houthi prime minister, Abdelaziz bin Habtour, warned in an October 22 television address that “Zionist ships” in the Red Sea would also be attacked if Israeli military action in Gaza continued. Quoted in author’s subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons.

av Thus, DeLozier noted, Saudi closure of Houthi airports would be answered with strikes on southern Saudi airports, and Saudi blockading of Houthi ports would be countered with attacks on Saudi ports and vessels. Elana DeLozier, “Houthi Messaging May Hint at a Targeting Pattern,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 13, 2019.

aw Though impressive among axis of resistance members, the Houthi strikes on Israel were all intercepted and had no effect on Israel’s decision to mount a ground operation in Gaza from October 27, 2023, onward. Moreover, they expended the highest-end, most exquisite systems available to the Houthis: extended range MRBMs and cruise missiles.

ax The Iranian formula of guerrilla naval tactics is mirrored quite precisely: fast attack craft dispersed across inlets; use of spy dhows and surveillance ships and coast-watchers; extensive reliance on drones and anti-ship cruise missiles; and the option of mines, if needed.

ay Older ASCMs such as Rubezh B-21/B-22 (the Houthi name for Soviet P-21 and P-22/RS-SSC-3 *Styx*) and the *Al Mandab-1* (Houthi name for Chinese C-801) were gradually phased out and turned into parade floats, emergency stores, spare parts, or even decoys. In 2018, the author saw a number of Rubezh ASCMs abandoned on the Red Sea coast front in Hodeida that the Houthis had de-prioritized when they evacuated. Author’s personal recollection from period of embedded reporting with Gulf coalition forces in Yemen in 2018.

az In particular, the report notes that Ansar Allah undertook combat diver training on Zuqur islands in the Red Sea as early as 2017. Michael Knights, “The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture,” *CTC Sentinel* 11:8 (2018).

ba These included successful seizures by Iranian helicopter- and boat-borne commandos, for instance *Advantage Sweet* (April 27, 2023) and earlier the *Stena Impero* (July 19, 2019). Other seizure operations failed due to U.S. intervention, such as *TRF Moss* (July 5, 2023) and *Richmond Voyager* (July 5, 2023). The list also included at-sea seizures by Iranian naval forces unrelated to Iranian foreign policy, such as *Niovi* (May 3, 2023) and *Purity* (May 12, 2023). See Raydan and Nadimi.

bb Raydan and Nadimi note: At the time of the attack, the ship was owned by Israel-based Ray Shipping Ltd. (though it was chartered and operated by a Japanese company). See Raydan and Nadimi.

bc The Houthis turned the *Galaxy Leader* into a global media sensation, with slick video of the helicopter assault placed online. Within Yemen, the Houthis made the *Galaxy Leader* a kind of tourist attraction. See “Piracy Park: Yemen’s Houthis convert hijacked *Galaxy Leader* into tourist attraction at \$1 per visit,” *First Post*, January 29, 2024.

bd Houthi efforts to detect and track vessels took a number of forms, from increasing the density of patrol vessels and “spy dhows” (surveillance ships) in the Red Sea; use of long-range optics at elevated sites; making more rapid use of electronic intelligence provided by Iranian surveillance vessels and Houthi drones; using open-source vessel-tracking services; using the marine radar of commercial ships in Houthi ports; and boosting the power supply of GSM towers to allow them to interact with cellphones active on commercial vessels. These details are gathered from U.S. military interviewees for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request. See also prior work on these themes in Knights, “The Houthi War Machine.”



Screen capture from footage published on a Houthi Telegram channel on November 1, 2023, purporting to show a UAS launch by the group. The image shows a V-wing Sammad-2 or Sammad-3 drone, which DIA assesses to be a version of the Iranian Sayyad (KAS-04) drone. See the declassified dossier, “Iran Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East,” Defense Intelligence Agency, February 2024.

and hunting tactics^{be} but no other ship was successfully boarded or seized. At least two of these cases saw very determined pursuits of vessels that spanned more than a day of complex maneuvering and integrated drone, speedboat, and shored-based activities.^{bf} In the last example of the Houthis trying to board a ship, U.S. helicopter sank three Houthi vessels on November 26, killing 10 Houthi operators after they machine-gunned the bridge deck of the Maersk Hangzhou.¹⁰⁰

From December 2023 onward, the Houthis shifted their focus to deliberate efforts to sink vessels. In December, there were five Houthi efforts to board ships but 15 efforts to cause damage with long-range strikes.¹⁰¹ Houthi anti-shipping tactics were not gradually ratcheted up, say from small one-way attack drones to heavier munitions: Instead, all three of the attacks on December 3

be The Houthis appear to have gone through a number of quick-fire evolutions in November and December 2023 regarding how they organized their fast attack craft flotillas, with various mixtures of mother ships (fishing boats) to undertake electronic intelligence-gathering and communications with land headquarters, ship-launched drones, fast pursuit boats, and boarding parties. These details are gathered from U.S. military interviewees for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

bf One example of this is the effort to seize the Ardmore Encounter, a Marshall Islands-flagged ship carrying jet fuel on December 13, 2023, which was chased by multiple boat groups and subjected to missile and drone attacks, possibly in an effort to slow the vessel down. These details are gathered from U.S. military interviewees for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

appear to have involved ASBMs.^{bg} Of the 15 Houthi anti-shipping strikes carried out in December and early January,¹⁰² before the United States directly intervened with strikes on Yemeni soil on January 12, 2024, seven are reported to have used heavier missiles (six ASBMs and one ASCM) and eight employed one-way attack drones with small warheads.¹⁰³ Though expanding the scope of targeting—to include Israeli-owned vessels and all ships visiting Israeli ports from December 9, 2023^{bh}—the Houthi leadership remained somewhat committed to discriminate targeting, at no point using naval mines, for instance.^{bi}

A number of factors reduced the overall technical effectiveness of Houthi anti-shipping warfare (i.e., damaging and sinking ships) and prevented the Houthis from being as discriminating as they probably wished to be in terms of verifying the nationality of target ships. For instance, they have struck the ships or cargoes of putative allies such as Iran^{bj} or powerful non-aligned parties^{bk} such as China^{bl} and Russia^{bm}—who abstained in the U.N. resolution that came imminently before the U.S.-U.K. strikes began.¹⁰⁴ The Houthis have even struck food deliveries bound for their own ports—in essence blockading themselves.^{bn} In the author’s assessment,¹⁰⁵ the Houthis appear to have made many basic research errors^{bo} about the current ownership (at the time of attacks) of vessels, suggesting quite rudimentary and negligent intelligence-gathering on potential targets.¹⁰⁶

In many cases, though, the pure range mechanics of anti-shipping warfare, *not* target research, may have worsened the difficulty of hitting the *right* moving targets at long-range in a fairly

bg The three attempted ASBM strikes were on the bulk carrier Unity Explorer, the container ship Number 9, and the bulk carrier AOM Sophie II. See Raydan and Nadimi.

bh On December 9, Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea stated that the movement would now target all ships sailing to Israel, regardless of ownership. Author’s subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons.

bi No naval mines or Houthi mine-laying activities have been encountered until the time of writing. Author’s geolocated incident dataset of the post-October 7 war.

bj It was noted: “On February 12, two Houthi missiles targeted the Star Iris cargo ship, which was transporting corn from Brazil to Iran.” Author’s subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons.

bk In the framework of great power competition, the axis of resistance clearly leans toward the non-U.S. bloc, led by China and Russia. On March 23, it was reported, Chinese and Russian diplomats sought Houthi guarantees that their shipping would not be hit in return for ongoing support to the Houthis in the United Nations Security Council. Author’s subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons.

bl Just days after the aforementioned effort to negotiate free passage for Chinese and Russian shipping, the Chinese-owned Huang Pu was targeted with five Houthi ASBMs on March 23, 2024. Raydan and Nadimi.

bm Likewise, on January 12, 2024, the Russian vessel Khalissa was struck by a Houthi anti-shipping attack. Raydan and Nadimi.

bn In one case, the Sea Champion, carrying grain from Argentina to the Houthi-held port of Hodeida, was attacked by Houthi missiles. Raydan and Nadimi.

bo The incident-by-incident tracker produced by Noam Raydan and Farzin Nadimi is exceptionally useful for many reasons, not least its use of ship ownership data to note recent changes in ship ownership that the Houthis appear to have missed—with Israeli-, U.S.,- and U.K.-linked ships that may have been brought by Chinese owners, for instance. Raydan and Nadimi.

crowded body of water.^{bp} In the case of drones, used in about half of Houthi anti-shipping attacks, the key drawback (aside from their small warhead sizes^{bq}) is their slowness.^{br} For instance, a Sammad-type one-way attack drone traveling from the Red Sea coast of Yemen to the middle of the shipping lanes will fly for at least 30 minutes before reaching its destination, by which time a tanker moving at 20 knots will have moved around 20 kilometers.¹⁰⁷ By the time a drone arrives at engages with its terminal electro-optical infrared seeker, the original target may be far away from the original reported location.^{bs}

The same issue pertains to drone boats, which move more slowly than even a fixed-wing drone, meaning their quarry might have moved as far as 70 kilometers by the time the drone boat approaches its calculated location and switches on its terminal electro-optical infrared seeker.¹⁰⁸ Aerial and naval drone systems are quite vulnerable to detection and interception, especially if they need to send and receive updated navigation or targeting information while approaching a target.¹⁰⁹ The particular difficulty in guiding a USV onto a specific target at long range may account for the very small number of explosive drone boats (just two by April 24, 2024¹¹⁰) used by the Houthis in the conflict,¹¹¹ despite Houthi naval commander Brigadier General Mansour al-Saadi claiming in mid-December that around 80 such USVs have been stockpiled.¹¹²

Anti-ship cruise missiles are more capable systems, and the Houthis have been building up their ASCM arsenal since 2015, at first through receipt of the Iranian Nour and Ghadar missiles, two variants of the Chinese C-802, which the Houthis call Al-Mandab-2.¹¹³ This kind of weapon was used with great success in October 2016 to permanently cripple a UAE high-speed transport vessel¹¹⁴ and may have been used previously to sink an Israeli gunboat in 2006.¹¹⁵ Due to the narrowness of the lower Red Sea, even if the Houthis are operating unimproved 120-kilometer Mandab-1 versions, this system can cover the shipping lanes opposite Ras Issa and Hodeida, reaching down as far as the Zuqur islands.¹¹⁶

bp The pre-crisis totals were around 50-60 strait transits by large vessels per day. Lori Ann LaRocco, "Viewpoint: What Red Sea attacks mean for shipping Weekend assault on commercial vessels could have impact on global trade," *Freight Waves*, December 4, 2023.

bq Iran-provided drones such as the Sammad and Shahed series carry small warheads with under 40 kilograms of high explosive, which can kill exposed personnel on deck or within bridge housing, and which might have the ability to penetrate even double-hulled tankers due to their explosive-formed penetrator configurations, but they will almost never do critical damage or immobilize or sink a ship. This is the author's assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors' analytic processes.

br Iran-provided drones such as the Sammad and Shahed series cruise at about 185 kilometers per hour. This is slow enough that helicopters can overtake them, as was shown when a French helicopter crew shot down one Houthi drone with its door-gunner's defensive pintle-mounted machine-gun. "French Navy Helicopter shoots down Houthi drone in Red Sea," *Telegraph*, March 20, 2024.

bs If the correct heading is known, an approximate new location can be predicted and programed into an inertial navigation flight planner, creating a closed system that does not rely on a constant command link or GPS signal and which is therefore hard to jam with electronic countermeasures. Once the drone arrives and switches on its terminal guidance system—an electro-optical seeker looking for a ship silhouette or a signal receiver looking for ship transponders—the system is essentially self-guiding. All details gathered from interviews with U.S. and U.K. military personnel for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

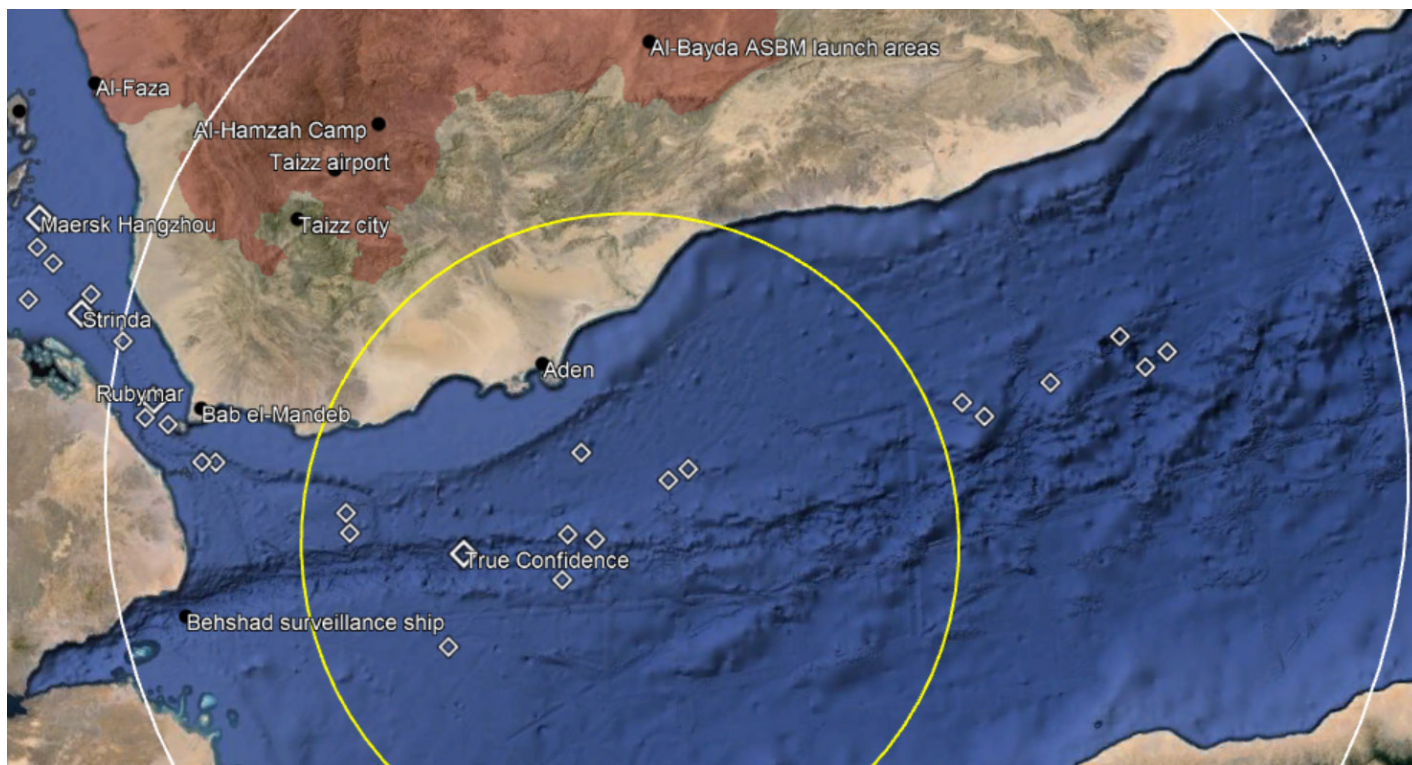
Only one anti-shipping attack has been strongly associated with an ASCM, however: the December 11, 2023, missile strike on the Norwegian-owned chemicals tanker *Strinda*, which was due to call on Israel's port of Ashdod in early January 2024.¹¹⁷ Closing head-on with the *Strinda* from a distance of 150 kilometers, the Houthi ASCM would only have needed to fly for around eight minutes,¹¹⁸ giving it a fairly small search area (of under 10 kilometers square)¹¹⁹ when its active radar seeker activated. Had an escort vessel been nearby, it probably could have jammed the terminal radar guidance,¹²⁰ but in this case the missile flew uninterrupted and struck the *Strinda*, passing through the ship and causing fires but no casualties.¹²¹ Given this result, it is perhaps surprising that more ASCMs have not been used, and might suggest (in the author's assessment¹²²) a Houthi withholding approach toward these valuable weapons.^{bt} Of note, while other ASCMs have been shown by the Houthis at parades,^{bu} the only ASCM known to have been used by the Houthis is the Al Mandab-2 (C-802).¹²³

The final type^{bv} of anti-shipping weapon used by the Houthis in the current war is the Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile. Though the

bt The Houthis have been very sparing in their use of ASCMs, both against the Saudi-led coalition and the United States and Israel. This could be to retain some secrecy around the performance of such systems, though they seem keen to display them at parades. Interceptions of Houthi arms-smuggling vessels have revealed no ASCM types other than the Mandab-2, with its distinctive fuselage, engine, and multi-directional shaped-charge warhead. The Houthis have received Quds-series land attack cruise missiles from Iran (in intercepted shipments from November 25, 2019, and February 9, 2020, and most recently in interceptions on January 11, 2024, and January 28, 2024. For the 2019 and 2020 intercepts (and others), see "The Iran Primer: Timeline: U.S. Seizures of Iranian Weapons at Sea," United States Institute for Peace, February 15, 2024. For the 2024 intercepts, see "USCENTCOM Seizes Iranian Advanced Conventional Weapons Bound for Houthis," U.S. Central Command, January 16, 2024, and "CENTCOM Intercepts Iranian Weapons Shipment Intended for Houthis," U.S. Central Command, February 15, 2024. Overall, the numbers of cruise missiles and ASCMs found in interceptions has been very small—single airframes usually, almost suggestive of sending prototypes intended to aid local production efforts of some components (such as airframes and control surfaces). The Houthis may not yet own a large ASCM arsenal and may be carefully husbanding what they have. For detailing on weapons used, the author used his geolocated incident dataset of the post-October 7 war, cross-checked against Raydan and Nadimi.

bu Newer systems shown at Houthi parades in 2022-2023 include two anti-shipping variants adapted from Quds-series (Iranian 351/Paveh) land attack cruise missiles, namely the Sayyad (radar-homing) and Quds-Z-0 (electro-optical seeker). See "The Iran Primer: Timeline: U.S. Seizures of Iranian Weapons at Sea," United States Institute for Peace, February 15, 2024. See also Fabian Hinz, "Houthi anti-ship missile systems: getting better all the time," International Institute for Security Studies, January 8, 2024, and Michael Knights and Farzin Nadimi, "Yemen's 'Southern Hezbollah' Celebrates Coup Anniversary in Deadly Fashion," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 28, 2023.

bv The Houthis are also reported by the United States to have employed an unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) on one occasion when U.S. forces destroyed the system (February 17, 2024). The U.S. Central Command daily update noted: "This is the first observed Houthi employment of a UUV since attacks began in Oct. 23." "Feb. 17 Summary of Red Sea Activities," U.S. Central Command, February 18, 2024. Earlier, the United States captured parts of a UUV in the January 28, 2024, U.S. maritime intercept operation on a Houthi arms-smuggling ship. See "USCENTCOM Seizes Iranian Advanced Conventional Weapons Bound for Houthis."



Map 1: Houthi anti-shipping posture in the Gulf of Aden. The red-shaded areas are Houthi-occupied, and the white diamonds are known attacks on shipping (until map production on April 11, 2024). The yellow circle is a 150-kilometer radius drawn out from the area of the main shipping corridor in which most ships have been attacked, and the white circle is a 300-kilometer radius, the likely maximum range (in the author's view) of the Mohit and Asef ASBMs used by the Houthis. This map shows that it is difficult for the Houthis to use slower drone systems on the eastern side of the Gulf of Aden due to their lack of coastline launch sites, with ships likely to move long distances before such drones could close with the target. Updated course corrections to drones might be provided by the Iranian Behshad and other vessels in collaboration with retransmission towers in high places such as Taizz—where the United States undertook multiple rounds of strikes on GSM towers in November and December. ASBMs launched from inland areas such as Al-Bayda and Taizz have been a key weapon for rapidly reaching moving targets in the Gulf of Aden.

Houthis have teased their ownership of newer ASBMs at parades,^{bw} evidence only exists to suggest two types of ASBM are regularly used in Houthi service: The first, probably more numerous, is the liquid-fuel Mohit, which is a converted SA-2 surface-to-air missile with a range of about 275 kilometers and an electro-optical infrared seeker.¹²⁴ Use of this system is likely because the components—SA-2 SAMs—are still available in significant numbers and have been regularly employed by the Houthis in a surface-to-surface role (as the Houthi Qahir-1).^{bx} The other—which the DIA says has been

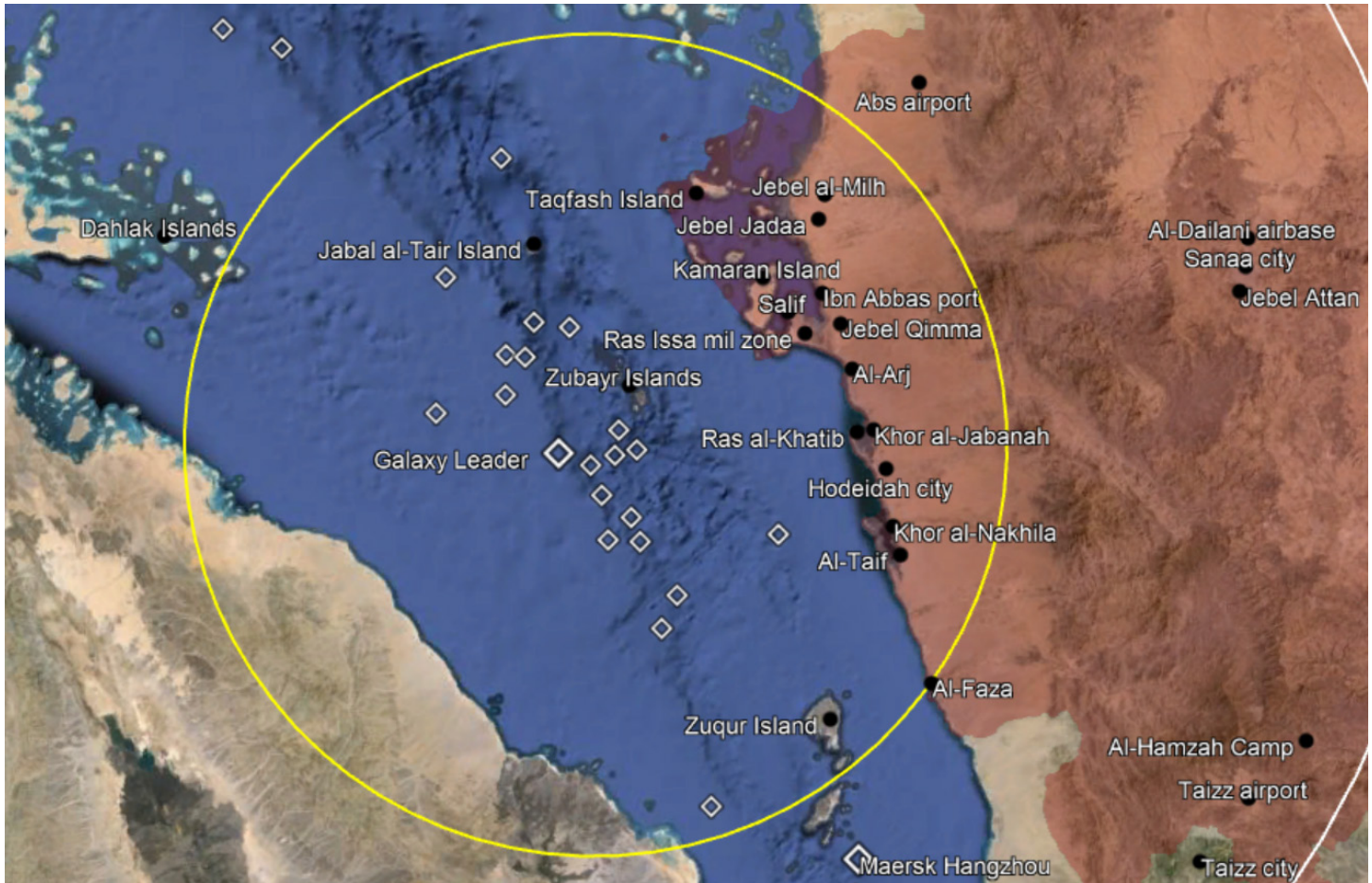
^{bw} Analysts of the September 21, 2024, parade noted the presence of smaller ASBMs at Houthi parades, such as the Tankil (450-km, likely only a mock-up for now, according to Farzin Nadimi), the Falaq (200-km), and the Al-Nahr al-Ahmar and Mayun variants of the Badr-P tactical rocket (140-km). Hinz, “Houthi anti-ship missile systems: getting better all the time;” Knights and Nadimi. See also Farzin Nadimi, “Under Fire in the Bab al-Mandab: Houthi Military Capabilities and U.S. Response Options,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 8, 2023.

^{bx} The Qahir-1 is the name for converted Houthi SA-2s, a technique borrowed from the Iranian experience of converting SA-2s to turn them into surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) of the Tondar type, which is itself an Iranian copy of the Chinese HQ-2 SAM-turned-SSM. See Michael Knights, “Countering Iran’s Missile Proliferation in Yemen,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 8, 2017.

used in the current conflict^{by}—is the solid-fuel Asef, a copy of Iran’s Khaleej-e Fars (the navalized Fateh-110) missile with a range of at least 300 kilometers and also an electro-optical infrared seeker.¹²⁵

Both these missiles have the advantage of a much larger warhead (350 kilograms for the Mohit, 450 kilograms for the Asef) versus either Houthi drones (15–40 kilograms) or cruise missiles (165 kilograms with shaped-charge armor-piercing effects).¹²⁶ Another advantage of the ASBM is speed: In addition to potentially hitting the target with penetrating kinetic power as well as explosive force,¹²⁷ the ASBM closes the distance on a moving ship faster than any other system, meaning the ship moves the least distance from its last known location. Thus, a relatively slow improvised ASBM like the Mohit might reach its target within three to four minutes (at 150–250 kilograms), during which time a commercial vessel might only have moved three to five kilometers on a predictable course.¹²⁸ A faster ASBM or one operating at closer range might halve these numbers.¹²⁹ For this reason, ASBMs quickly became the single most-employed Houthi anti-shiping weapon after their

^{by} The DIA assessed at least one of the launched ASBMs used in the current Gaza war by the Houthis is the Asef missile. See “Iran Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East.”



Map 2: Houthi anti-shipping posture in the Red Sea. The red-shaded areas are Houthi-occupied, and the white diamonds are known attacks on shipping (until map production on April 11, 2024). The yellow circle is a 150-kilometer radius drawn out from the area of the main shipping corridor in which most ships have been attacked, and the white circle is a 300-kilometer radius, the likely maximum range (in the author's view) of the Mohit and Asef ASBMs used by the Houthis.

triple usage on December 3.^{bz} On February 18, 2024, the Houthis used ASBMs to strike the Rubymar chemical tanker, causing the first sinking of a ship in the conflict on March 2.¹³⁰ ASBMs also caused the first civilian casualties of the anti-shipping war, with three seafarers killed when the True Confidence was struck on March 6, 2024.¹³¹

The Impact of U.S. Airstrikes

On December 16, 2023, the United States and nine coalition partners^{ca} established a new Red Sea and Indian Ocean naval task force—Operation Prosperity Guardian¹³²—and began issuing ultimatums to the Houthis to cease their attacks on shipping.¹³³ At that stage, no ship had been sunk nor even had lost power, and

no seafarers had been killed,¹³⁴ but the Houthi naval harassment campaign nonetheless prompted all of the top-10 shipping and logistics firms to suspend use of the lower and central Red Sea, impacting Bab el-Mandab and Suez Canal traffic.¹³⁵ After a final three weeks of Houthi rhetorical defiance^{cb} and ongoing attacks,^{cc} and a January 10, 2024, U.N. resolution,^{cd} the United States and the United Kingdom commenced airstrikes on Houthi targets onshore in Yemen on January 12.¹³⁶

What did the Houthi naval and coastal defense target system

^{bz} In the central Red Sea, 11 of 21 (47 percent) anti-shipping attacks from October 19 to March 31 used ASBMs, with the remainder split between drones and seizure attempts. In the southern Red Sea, six of 14 were ASBMs (43 percent). In the Indian Ocean, 11 of 15 (73 percent) were ASBMs. Author's geolocated incident dataset of the post-October 7 war, cross-checked against Raydan and Nadimi.

^{ca} These being the United States, United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, and Spain. See "Statement from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea," U.S. Department of Defense, December 18, 2023.

^{cb} On December 20, 2023, for instance, the Houthi military spokesman Yahya Sarea said of the risk of a U.S. attack: "They've tried us for nine years; if they want to do it again, we are here and ready." Houthi leader Abdalmalik al-Huthi added on the same day, "the Americans shouldn't think they can make attacks here or there and then send intermediaries to calm the situation down." Sarea tweeted that Houthi retaliation would exceed what U.S. American forces "faced in Afghanistan and suffered in Vietnam." Author's subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons.

^{cc} There were six unsuccessful Houthi attacks on commercial ships in over the first nine days of January 2024. Raydan and Nadimi.

^{cd} Four members, including Russia and China, abstained during the vote. "Adopting Resolution 2722 (2024) by Recorded Vote, Security Council Demands Houthis Immediately Stop Attacks on Merchant, Commercial Vessels in Red Sea," United Nations, January 10, 2024.

comprise as the opening U.S. strikes were planned and undertaken? Fixed (or immobile) key target types included:

- Known Houthi missile and liquid fuel storage sites in Sanaa and elsewhere in the Houthi interior, usually in pre-civil war improved cave systems such as the Jebel Attan “presidential mountain” in Sanaa.^{ce}
- Post-2015 onshore missile and drone storage facilities such as Jebel Qimma, Jebel al-Milh, and Jebel Jadaa,¹³⁷ all small rocky hills that protrude 20–40 meters (70–140 feet) above the surrounding Hodeida governorate coastal plain and where quarrying has left enlarged caves that may have been further improved (on the Iranian and Hezbollah tunneling model)¹³⁸ since the Houthis began to utilize these sites in 2020–2021.^{cf}
- Training and depot locations for the Houthi naval and coastal defenses forces at locations such as Hodeida’s Ras al-Khatib naval base and the Khor al-Jabana naval and coastal defense complex across the inner anchorage, both relatively visible locations.^{cg} A second major headquarters area is the Ras Issa military zone and the adjacent Kamaran Island military zone, both large areas that are subject to closure to non-military personnel during security operations.¹³⁹ These sites have been prepared for precision attacks through the creation of hundreds of identical weapons storage “igloos” (buried shipping containers).¹⁴⁰
- Resupply points where Iranian advanced conventional munitions have historically made landfall, notably the inlets of Kamaran Island and the nearby Ibn Abbas; the Khor al-Nakhila area (a seven-kilometer area of sheltered coast encompassing Khor al-Nakhila, Khor al-Ghulayfiqah, and Al-Taif);¹⁴¹ ^{ch} and finally the Al-Faza area, where a 15-kilometer stretch of coast can be closed to the public and fishermen when resupply ships enter the road-adjacent canals built there in the second half of 2022 to allow inshore

ce The mountain and surrounding camp have been associated with elite presidential forces since the late 1960s and with Yemeni missile forces since the Republic of Yemen gained its first surface-to-surface missiles in the 1980s. Jebel Attan is honeycombed with improved caves that were considered by Gulf and Western intelligence agencies to be a shelter for missile systems and liquid fuel storage. This is an almost uniform view gathered from interviews for this study (with Gulf, U.S., and U.K. intelligence officials) and fits with the author’s assessment. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

cf The author keeps a close watch on all the declared cargoes entering Hodeida port, the only Houthi container and general cargo port. One noticeable trend is the regularity with which shiploads of steel, timber, and concrete have arrived in the Houthi areas at a time of general economic depression. Even in the first five months of the current crisis (October 2023–March 2024), while food imports to Yemen dropped by 30 percent (by the author’s tallying of U.N.-announced cargoes), non-food and non-fuel cargoes (mainly steel and timber) dropped by only 18 percent. It may be worthwhile for intelligence community analysts to try to account for where these building materials are mainly being utilized, to differentiate reconstruction from military fortification and tunneling.

cg These are both largely above-ground complexes close to sea-level that are well-known as Houthi naval and coastal defense hubs. Details gathered from interviews with U.S. and U.K. military personnel for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

ch These locations also have a tight lock with areas bombed by the United States and United Kingdom since January 2024. Author’s geolocated incident dataset of the post-October 7 war.

unloading at high tide.^{ci}

- Larger surveillance platforms, including communications towers and long-range optics (LOROPS) and naval and air defense radars. Of interest, LOROPS systems were discovered in the January 28, 2024, intercepted shipment of Iran-provided arms being sent to the Houthis.¹⁴²

Largely re-locatable and mobile target types included:

- Houthi “missile battalions” that employ drone, ASCM, and ASBM units, drawn from both the aerospace forces and the naval forces.^{cj}
- Houthi USVs, fast-attack boat units and their mother ships (fishing vessels), moving between various rocky inlets or stretches of coast vegetated by mangrove trees.^{ck}
- Houthi air defense units, which primarily pose a threat to multinational drones (shooting down two MQ-9 Reapers over Yemen on November 8, 2023, and February 19, 2024).¹⁴³ ^{cl} The two key systems observed in use are both Iran-provided: the Houthi Saqar-1 and -2 (Iran’s 358-series anti-air loitering munition)^{cm} and the Houthi Barq-2 (Iran’s Taer-2,¹⁴⁴ capable of trying to intercept coalition jets within a 40-kilometer radius, and thus able to cover large complexes such as Ras Issa/Kamaran).^{cn}
- Houthi helicopters and their minimal supporting infrastructure.^{co}
- Specialist headquarters personnel and foreign (i.e., Iranian and perhaps Lebanese Hezbollah) advisors, with an extensive preventative security infrastructure to conceal,

ci The new canal was not visible in Google Earth imagery from July 2022 but present in November 2022 imagery.

cj Very little is known about the “missile battalions,” which are more likely to be batteries operating in very small tactical echelons, possibly exposing only single disguised launch vehicles at a time. Details gathered from interviews with U.S. and U.K. military personnel for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

ck The USVs have not clustered together since a series of Saudi strikes on Ras Kamaran in 2017–2018. They appear, based on U.S. strike reports, to have been dispersed to the inlets and canals south of Hodeida. Details gathered from interviews with U.S. and U.K. military personnel for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

cl Iran-backed militias in Iraq brought down another MQ-9 in Iraq on January 18, 2024. See Michael Knights, Amir al-Kaabi, and Hamdi Malik, “Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis,” *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which is updated on daily basis and publicly available online.

cm The DIA assesses that 358-series surface-to-air missiles have been used in multiple attacks on U.S. drones in Yemen. See “Iran Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East.”

cn A Barq-2, the Houthi designation for Taer-2, was found recently crashed in the desert in Marib, Yemen, on March 22, 2024. See Ali Al-Sakani and Fabian Hinz, “Note entirely certain, but it does look a lot like a Houthi Barq 2 surface-to-air missile . . .,” X, March 22, 2024 (with imagery).

co Three strikes on Houthi helicopters have been undertaken. Helicopters are vital to seizure operations such as the *Galaxy Leader*. The Houthis kept the helicopters dispersed and hidden, but some appear to have been reacquired by the United States. Details gathered from interviews with U.S. and U.K. military personnel for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

disperse, and relocate them as needed.^{cp}

The U.S.-led strike operations starting on January 12 (Operation Poseidon Archer^{ca}) have (at the time of writing) now taken place on 40 separate days, with some days seeing multiple rounds of strikes on multiple target complexes.^{cr} A careful day-by-day accounting of the U.S.-led operations reveals (in the author's view) the phases of the campaign so far: initial broad strikes on known fixed targets related to missile and drone warfare, and the immediate benefit of seeing the Iranian surveillance and arsenal ship, Behshad, leave the Red Sea along with other Iranian naval vessels.^{cs} This shifted some of the action to the Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb itself, and was followed by an apparently unsuccessful late-January 2024 U.S. effort to suppress Houthi ASBM launches on the Gulf of Aden from the inland mountains of Abyan and Taizz.^{ct}

Destruction of Houthi air defenses (eight to 12 strikes)^{cu} and the hunting down of helicopters (at least three strikes) were stretched-out processes that had mostly concluded (perhaps temporarily) by

the end of February 2024.¹⁴⁵ A focused effort was made in the first half of February to destroy the dispersed Houthi USV fleet, with an estimated destruction of 16 drone boats in their hide-sites (about a quarter of the claimed Houthi arsenal).^{cv} The "dynamic targeting" of Houthi missile forces, largely on the Red Sea coast, saw U.S. strikes occurring on average every two days from early February to early March.¹⁴⁶ From March 7-22, the United States seemed to accelerate preemptive targeting of suspected missile batteries,^{cw} with at least six major strikes characterized as destroying entire batteries (of four to six missiles or drones) or storage sites.¹⁴⁷ Although some of these targets might be decoys, it appears as likely that after months of observation, the United States successfully profiled the "pattern of life" of Houthi missile forces, allowing them (with more aggressive rules of engagement) to effectively strike them as they were drawn out of their hide-sites for use or to be shuffled into a new hide-site,^{cx} often a buried container.^{cx}

Effect of Strikes on Houthi Intentions and Capabilities

Tallying all strikes until the time of data cut-off (April 24, 2024), Sanaa experienced the most U.S.-U.K. strikes (around 33); the Al-Jabana missile, drone, and naval zone northeast of Hodeida's port was also heavily hit (26); and the remaining intensively struck areas were two locations used for resupply and boat dispersal (the Nakhila coast (19) and the Al-Faza canals (11)) plus the missile storage caves at Jebels al-Milh, Qimma, and Jadaa (13).¹⁴⁸ Much has no doubt been learned by the United States about the Houthi naval and coastal defense system and its offensive and defensive tactics, limitations, and vulnerabilities over the past half year.

In addition to the disruption and losses caused by strikes, the

cp In the previous October 2022 *CTC Sentinel* article, the authors described the very professional (Iran- and Hezbollah-trained) Preventative Security organization and underlined which Houthi commanders were responsible for protection of Iranian advisors. Knights, al-Gabarni, and Coombs.

cq As the Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh noted on January 25, 2024: "Operation Poseidon Archer is not a named [U.S. Department of Defense] operation but it is something that [U.S. Central Command] has named in terms of multilateral strikes and dynamic strikes within Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen." See "Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh Holds a Press Briefing," U.S. Department of Defense, January 25, 2024. It is distinct from the maritime escort mission of Operation Prosperity Guardian, and Operation Poseidon Archer only includes the United States and United Kingdom.

cr At the time of writing, the strikes break down into four larger multinational (i.e., U.S.-U.K.) joint deliberate strikes (January 12 and 20, February 3 and 29) and 33 other days on which U.S. forces unilaterally engaged "pop-up" or dynamic targets that triggered U.S. rules of the engagement. Author's geolocated incident dataset of the post-October 7 war.

cs On January 10, 2024, ship-tracking services reported the Iranian Behshad arsenal and surveillance ship leaving the Red Sea, on its way to a safe (Chinese military) harbor in Djibouti. See Tanker Trackers, "Iranian 'spy ship' BEHSHAD (9167289) has departed the southern sector of the Red Sea . . .," X, January 10, 2024. The Behshad eventually left the Chinese anchorage but did not return to the Red Sea, instead providing a surveillance post covering the Gulf of Aden and a transshipment platform to break Iranian arms and personnel cargoes down into smaller loads for landing by fishing boats. See Alex Longley, "Iranian Ship Back in Gulf of Aden After Reported US Cyberattack," Bloomberg, February 22, 2024. See also Courtney Kube and Carol E. Lee, "U.S. conducted cyberattack on suspected Iranian spy ship," NBC News, February 15, 2024, and Robert Wright, "The mysterious Iranian ship accused of lining up the next Houthi targets," *Financial Times*, March 9, 2024. The Behshad subsequently, in mid-April 2024, returned all the way to Iran, though it is unclear if its functions were replaced by another ship or by different means. See Patrick Sykes, "Iran Ship Linked to Houthi Attacks Goes Home Amid Tensions," Bloomberg, April 18, 2024.

ct In February, the United States repeatedly struck ASBM launch sites in the inland mountains of Abyan and Taizz, and also communications towers there that may have been used as elevated masts for long-range optics and electronic intelligence-gathering. This did not seem to end ASBM attacks in March on Indian Ocean shipping, but U.S. strikes in the area ceased in March. Author's geolocated incident dataset of the post-October 7 war.

cu The key air defense threat encountered was 358-series Iran-made loitering anti-aircraft missiles over the Kamran Island and Ras Issa military zones. The predominance of E/A-18 aircraft (electronic warfare versions of the FA-18) coming off the U.S. carriers suggests a prudent suppression of enemy air defense effort to ensure no radar-guided SAMs were fired. The electro-optically guided 358-series loitering anti-aircraft missiles are mainly a threat to U.S. drones, and a number of these appear to have been engaged as "dynamic targets" when encountered. Author's geolocated incident dataset of the post-October 7 war.

cv In 2019-2020, the Saudis destroyed nine Houthi USVs at berth in Ras Issa (versus Houthi use of around 18 in attacks on Saudi ships and oil loading terminals). See Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Houthi naval attacks in the Red Sea," FDD's Long War Journal, August 17, 2019. In the current war, the USVs appear to have been dispersed in inlets south of Hodeida mainly. Details gathered from interviews with U.S. and U.K. military personnel for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cw This acceleration and slight loosening of the rules of engagement followed the sinking of Rubymar (on March 2) and the fatal attack on mariners on the True Confidence (March 6). Details gathered from interviews with U.S. and U.K. military personnel for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cx The @VleekieHond X thread from March 25, 2024, (with commercial satellite imagery overlaying strike locations on apparent storage igloos) hints at the intensive strikes on suspected missile locations by late March. See VleekieHond, "I bought some more high resolution imagery (0.5 meter) of this area near . . .," X, March 18, 2024.

cy This is a recurring procedure seen in Iraq and Syria as well. Covering shipping containers in earth, except for their entrances, is an economical way to produce bermed ammunition storage igloos that can be used to complicate the targeting process and play a 'shell game' with dispersed and hidden munitions. Any empty igloo is essentially a decoy target that may sap surveillance and strike efforts. Details gathered from interviews with U.S. and U.K. military personnel for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

Houthi system has probably (in the view of the author)^{cz} drawn down its war reserves at a faster rate than any other time in the movement's history—especially in terms of modern Houthi anti-shipping missiles, which have probably never been used or destroyed in such large numbers before.^{da} If high-quality open-source collation efforts and the author's own efforts in this regard are even broadly accurate, by April 24, 2024 the Houthis (combining launches and pre-launch losses) may have depleted their reserves to the tune of around 135 ASBMs,^{db} 87 ASCMs or other cruise missiles,^{149 de} 263 one-way attack or larger surveillance drones,^{150 dd} and 38 USVs.^{151 de} While the Houthis had run a marathon in their 2015-2022 bombardment of Saudi Arabia—which involved over 851 drones alone¹⁵²—the Gaza conflict was more akin to running a very fast mile. Averaged across 2015-2022,¹⁵³ the Houthis launched 11 drones a month at Saudi Arabia, versus an average of 40 a month expended (including both anti-Israel and anti-shipping strikes) from October 19, 2023, to April 24, 2024.¹⁵⁴ If only MRBMs, cruise missiles, and SRBMs with ranges over 250 kilometers are tallied for the 2015-2022 period (198),¹⁵⁵ the average is two per month fired at Saudi Arabia in 2015-2022, versus 35.6 per month (including both anti-Israel and anti-shipping strikes) expended from October 19, 2023, to April 24, 2024.¹⁵⁶

Yet, knowing the rough rate of expenditure and losses is insufficient in gauging the impact on Houthi stockpiles because of the yawning intelligence gap regarding the size of pre-war Houthi missile and drone reserves and domestic drone production

cz The author has monitored Houthi strike operations since 2014, including all strikes on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, within Yemen, in the maritime environment, and now against Israel, the United States, and United Kingdom. The Houthis have operated quite consistent drone and short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) campaigns against Saudi Arabia. According to the Saudi government, between March 2015 and December 2021, the Houthis launched 851 drones and 430 other munitions (probably almost all tactical rockets but also cruise missiles, SRBMs and MRBMs against Saudi targets, according to data from the Saudi armed forces. Quoted in Robbie Gramer, "Inside the Houthis' Stockpile of Iranian Weapons. Airstrikes haven't hindered their Red Sea attacks—at least yet," *Foreign Policy*, February 8, 2024.

da The Houthis had never, before November 26, 2023, fired an ASBM at a maritime target, and they had only conducted one proven ASCM attack, on the UAE vessel Swift. Author's geolocated incident dataset of the post-October 7 war, plus Weiss.

db Of which 62 launched and 33 destroyed on the ground. See the excellent collation work done on X by Intelschizo, most recently on March 11, 2024: Intelschizo, "11MAR2024 Updated Infographic of Houthi Missiles, Drones, USV's . . .," X, March 11, 2024.

dc Of which 14 launched and 73 destroyed on the ground.

dd Of which 175 launched, and 26 were destroyed on the ground. In the author's view, at least another 33 ASBMs were claimed destroyed on the ground by the United States, in the latter half of March 2024 as the rules of engagement slightly loosened. Author's geolocated incident dataset of the post-October 7 war.

de Of which three launched, and 35 were destroyed in their hide-sites. Author's geolocated incident dataset of the post-October 7 war. Of interest, Abdalmalik al-Huthi gave some metrics of his own on March 7, 2024, claiming that the Houthis had undertaken 90 attacks on 61 vessels utilizing 403 weapons systems. This latter munitions total is not appreciably different from March 11, 2024, open-source tracking figures given earlier in this study (401, including 95 ASBMs, 87 ASCMs or other cruise missiles, 201 one-way attack or larger surveillance drones, and 18 USVs). Abdalmalik quoted in author's subscription to collection of open source collation reports from 2023 and 2024, name of service withheld at the request of the service for safety reasons. Attack statistics from Intelschizo, "11MAR2024 Updated Infographic of Houthi Missiles, Drones, USV's . . .," X, March 11, 2024.

capacity,¹⁵⁷ and because it is unclear how many resupply vessels visited the Houthi-held areas prior to January 11, 2014, or since.¹⁵⁸ In the 12 weeks between October 7 and January 11, on-the-ground reporting suggests the Houthis landed at least four resupply vessels (assessed to each be capable of landing 30 tons of supplies) on the Nakhila coast.¹⁵⁹ On December 13, the Houthi-held port of Hodeida was visited for five days by boats that originated near Iran's Behshad arsenal ship, with unknown quantities of materiel and personnel offloaded.¹⁶⁰

On the eve of the initiation of U.S. strikes, the U.S. Navy intercepted one dhow off Somalia that was carrying 14 electro-optical trackers for surface-to-air missile systems, at least three ballistic missile warheads, at least five liquid-fuel type MRBM missile engines, and a single C-802/Ghadar-class Iranian ASCM, called Mandab-2 by the Houthis.¹⁶¹ Based on counting components visible in the press photograph, another Iranian shipment intercepted on January 28, 2024, included at least three USV guidance systems, component parts of a small unmanned underwater vehicle, and also at least two cruise missile active radar homing systems for Mandab-series missiles.¹⁶² Since this event, on-the-ground reporting suggests the Houthis received as many as eight small boats immediately in the first half of February 2024, in each case only after closing off the Nakhila coast and Al-Faza coastlines to civilians.¹⁶³ (In one very significant case, the small boats appear to have first interacted with a sanctioned Iranian mother ship vessel and the Behshad arsenal/surveillance ship.^{164 df}) Based on a very rough calculation,¹⁶⁵ this kind of trickle of missile and drone or USV components (if confirmed) would somewhat slow but not stop the rate of depletion (the author's calculated rate¹⁶⁶ being 13.8 missiles and 31 drones per month based on the prior paragraph) and thus extend Houthi endurance, especially if (as seems likely) there are supply runs that have not been detected at all.¹⁶⁷ In March 2024 and thus far in April, there were no new interceptions but only one reported landing was publicized.¹⁶⁸

Looking at Houthi operational tempo as a potential measure of effectiveness for U.S.-U.K. strikes, there is a stark difference between ongoing Houthi bombast and an apparent steep decline in Houthi military actions.¹⁶⁹ Houthi statements have continued to threaten escalation: beginning from March 4, 2024, to negotiate permits¹⁷⁰ for certain nations to traverse the Bab el-Mandab while others (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel) would be excluded;¹⁷¹ and threatening on March 15 to strike ships in the Indian Ocean all the way down the east coast of Africa toward the

df These include three boats of Iranian personnel on February 1 who entered Yemen via the passing container vessel Kashan, which has been linked by investigative reporters to Iranian state smuggling operations in support of the Assad regime in Syria. Melanie Swan, "Iranian bombs dropped on Israel are transported on ships using European ports," *Telegraph*, March 14, 2024. Regarding the three boats, details gathered from interviews with Yemen-watchers from the humanitarian, government and U.S. and U.K. think-tank communities for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. The Kashan was sanctioned by the United States in 2020. "U.S. Sanctions Iranian Shipping Companies," Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace, June 8, 2020. Both the Kashan and the Behshad had their transponders off from January 28 to February 2, 2024, during which time satellite imagery shows them moored together in Djiboutian waters on February 1. Author's use of commercial satellite imagery from this date range showing a ship matching the length, type, and deck color of the Kashan.

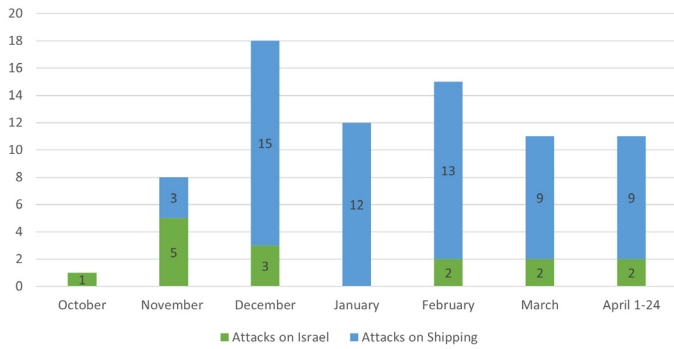


Figure 1: Houthi Operational Tempo, October 19, 2023, to April 24, 2024

Cape of Good Hope.^{172 dg} Houthi spokesmen also threatened the use of unmanned underwater vehicles and levied threats against submarine communications cables.^{173 dh}

Attack metrics seem to tell a different story: Houthi attacks against shipping and against Israel did not intensify in March or April 2024 (see Figure 1), instead holding at a slightly lower level than was evident in December, January, or February.¹⁷⁴ In the author's assessment,¹⁷⁵ the dramatic final sinking of the Rubymar (on March 2) and the fatal strike on the True Confidence (on March 6)¹⁷⁶ distracted from a gradual decline in Houthi anti-shipping actions and apparent attrition to Houthi missile units as March and April unfolded. In terms of munitions launched by the Houthis or destroyed as they were deployed for launch, April did bear witness to a dramatic month-on-month decline: the average number of attempted Houthi missiles and drones launchings in March was 3.8 versus 1.8 in the first 24 days of April 2024.¹⁷⁷ The raw number of larger Houthi munitions used in these attacks or attempted attacks also dropped sharply: from an average of 1.8 ASBMs per day in March to 0.3 per day in April (1-24). Drone attacks stayed the same: 1.9 per day in March and 1.8 per day in April 1-24. Whether the current Houthi downturn will persist—and whether it is voluntary or imposed by U.S. strikes and interdictions—is much less clear.¹⁷⁸

As important, since the U.S.-U.K. strikes that began on January

12, the Houthis have mostly^{di} handed off the task of directly striking Israel to the Iraqi militias in what may be a coordinated “offsetting” of the task to an axis of resistance member with more spare capacity.¹⁷⁹ In October–December 2023, the Houthis undertook more than twice the number of strikes (nine) that pro-Tehran Iraqi militia groups claimed against Israel (four), and were using much more advanced weapons including MRBMs (versus Iraqi militia-fired drones).¹⁸⁰ After U.S. strikes on the Houthis began on January 12 until the time of writing (April 24, 2024), Iraqi groups claim to have attacked Israel 47 times^{dj} versus only six Houthi strikes on Israel during the same period.¹⁸¹ (In a contrary trend, the Houthis tried to launch one MRBM and seven drones against Israel at the same time as Iran's April 13-14, 2024, direct attack on Israel, but all the Houthi launchers were struck on the ground by U.S. forces and the launches prevented.¹⁸²)

Lessons Learned, About and By the Houthis

Five months of conflict on the Red Sea and Gulf of Oman have provided important insights into the Houthi war machine, some of which are available in the unclassified realm and many more that will not be obvious to general observers but will be learned by the participants and their close security partners.^{dk} As has been the case in other wars involving minor powers, a category into which the Houthis arguably fit in the view of this author,¹⁸³ these conflicts offer a Spanish Civil War-type lens into how great powers or at least aspiring regional hegemony (such as Iran) might fight in the future. The conflict also gives a good view of the Houthi movement's strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats it will face in the coming years. The following section provides the author's assessment of these four categories, flowing out of the data and analysis above.

The strengths shown by the Houthi military at the present time are significant. The movement has mobilized very large numbers of troops during the conflict, reportedly as many as 167,000 new troops, further offsetting its extensive garrisoning requirements.^{dl}

dg Earlier, on November 25, 2023, the Houthis claimed to strike an Israeli-linked container ship, CMA CGM Symi, in the Indian Ocean using a one-way attack drone, over 2,200 kilometers from the nearest Houthi-controlled area in Yemen. Considering the range, targeting support from Iran (in the form of the Safir surveillance ship off the coast of India) is considered likely in this case. Details gathered from interviews with U.S. and U.K. military personnel for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

dh On subsea internet cables, the Houthis threatened to attack these, but then subsequently denied doing so after the cables were indeed damaged. For the Houthi February 2024 threat to cables, see Patrick Wintour, “Houthis may sabotage western internet cables in Red Sea, Yemen telecoms firms warn,” *Guardian*, February 5, 2024. For the March 2024 damage to the cables, see John Gambrell, “3 Red Sea data cables cut as Houthis launch more attacks in the vital waterway,” *Associated Press*, March 4, 2024. For discussion of the potential role of the sinking of the Rubymar ship and its anchor in the cable damage, see Eleanor Watson, “Ship sunk by Houthis likely responsible for damaging 3 telecommunications cables under Red Sea,” *CBS News*, March 6, 2024.

di The Houthis did mount some more attacks on Israel, but in far fewer numbers: For instance, an intercepted ballistic missile strike in February 2024. See Emmanuel Fabian, “Israel's Arrow intercepts Houthi ballistic missile headed for Eilat,” *Times of Israel*, February 22, 2024. One Houthi cruise missile made it through Israeli defenses on March 19, 2024. See Robert Tollast, “Houthi cruise missile breaches Israeli air defenses for first time,” *National*, March 20, 2024.

dj Based on Militia Spotlight's close correlation of Islamic Resistance of Iraq claims versus observed attacks, the IRI claim channel is quite careful not to besmirch its credibility with false claims. In the case of Israel attacks, weapons impact (in Israel) may be harder to detect for a number of reasons: Such impacts may be more likely to be missed among the general war situation (versus the less chaotic Iraqi and Syria environments); Israel may downplay successful strikes; drones have far longer to travel, making crashes and interceptions likelier; and Israel's own air defense has likely destroyed large proportions of the inbound projectiles. In the author's assessment, most of the IRI's Israel launch claims are probably factual, though their success rate seems to be very low, similar to the Houthis' own low penetration rate versus Israel. See Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik for metrics and attack detailing.

dk The United States and United Kingdom will be able to pass on these lessons to NATO, Gulf, and Asian partners: The Houthis will be able to share their experience with Axis of Resistance players; great powers such as China and Russia are likely to be watching closely.

dl As noted in Footnote O, Houthi figures suggest their trained reserve had reached 873,123 personnel and that this number had grown by 165,429 since October 7, 2023.

Exploitation of strong Yemeni sympathy for the Palestinians^{dm} has added to the recruiting potential of the Houthi movement, which already had a powerful military human resources system.¹⁸⁴ A second advantage is the divided and weak domestic opposition to Houthi rule, with the PLC factions lacking the freedom of action or the military force to exploit U.S. strikes. The Houthis continue to gain from Saudi Arabia's single-minded focus on ending the Yemen war and preventing any recurrence of Houthi missile and drone strikes on the kingdom.¹⁸⁵ In the author's assessment, a final strength shown by the Houthis has been resilience, pain tolerance, and strategic depth: The United States appears to have assumed from the outset that the Houthis could not be compelled to end their attacks, only partially disarmed (or "degraded") through direct strikes on their anti-shipping system.^{dn} ASBM attacks, which can be launched on shipping from practically any area in Houthi-held Yemen, underlined the value of Houthi strategic depth and concealment measures.

In the author's assessment, the Houthi military has also displayed some weaknesses in the conflict, although they hardly outweigh the strengths on show. The military capabilities of the Houthis, though boldly handled, have not been technically impressive.¹⁸⁶ Despite all their efforts, the movement (at the time of writing, April 24, 2024) failed to land a single effective blow on Israeli soil (with only one ballistic or cruise missile penetrating Israel's defenses¹⁸⁷) and only sank one ship. When facing the world's most advanced militaries, the capabilities built in Yemen by the axis of resistance were comprehensively (albeit expensively) countered. Houthi air defense took down two MQ-9 drones but otherwise proved ineffective against higher-flying manned aircraft—except perhaps to initially keep those aircraft at greater range and altitude.¹⁸⁸ Drone boats and helicopters lost most of the value they had attained in prior conflicts against less advanced opponents: Both had insufficient survivability to be of use once the United States and partner forces began to actively defend ships. Houthi reliance on a naval line of supply to Iran remains a key weakness that could be exploited in the future by a more effective U.S., Gulf, or European naval presence in the Red Sea. As with interceptions, however, this imposes a significant new cost on these defenders, which is a form of cost-imposing success for the Houthis, the Axis of Resistance, and for any great powers they ally with in the future.

The Houthis have significant opportunities that they might exploit in the near future. The Gaza conflict has shown them that their anti-shipping harassment tactics—guerrilla warfare at sea—do not need to be technically effective to nonetheless place a chokehold on Suez Canal transit and impose added costs on the global economic community. The world can do without the shortcut of the Suez—it is not the Strait of Hormuz, where free passage

“The world can do without the shortcut of the Suez—it is not the Strait of Hormuz, where free passage is essential—but the costly nature of the crisis will teach the Houthis the value of blockading the Bab al-Mandab Strait again in the future.”

is essential—but the costly nature^{do} of the crisis will teach the Houthis the value of blockading the Bab al-Mandab Strait again in the future and the need to employ more effective weapons and tactics (including hypersonic weapons) when that day comes.^{dp} The Houthis will also note the defensive stance taken by all the Arab states and particularly Saudi Arabia's focus on preserving the peace process, which may strengthen Houthi motivation to play hardball in peace negotiations and saber-rattle on Yemen's internal military fronts.¹⁸⁹ Though the war has shown Houthi capabilities to be quite inferior to U.S. and Israeli systems, if the precision weapons systems used by the Houthis in the Gaza war were turned on the much more vulnerable target set of PLC enemies, the results could be decisive in the author's assessment, a situation that could be partially rectified with international security assistance and training.^{190 dq} A final opportunity is stretching out the current war. The Houthis may recognize the value to their mobilization and indoctrination efforts of an ongoing anti-Israel and anti-Western struggle. They may not want to recede into global obscurity again.

At present, based on their words and deeds, the Houthis may feel that they do not face any credible military threats from enemies foreign or domestic, which is a recipe for overconfidence and risk-taking. In the current crisis, the domestic PLC adversaries made no aggressive moves to exploit U.S. strikes on the Houthis, restrained by a cautious Saudi Arabia that also avoided joining the U.S.-led coalition. Israel did not retaliate to any of the Houthis' attacks against it, on land or sea. Limited U.S. military strikes were painful but eminently survivable.

Yet, there are arguably emerging threats to the Houthi

dm The strength of pro-Palestinian feeling among Yemenis—in Houthi and non-Houthi areas—is an almost uniform observation gathered by the author himself on numerous visits to Yemen, in conversation with Yemenis over the years, and gathered from interviews for this study. For an open-source reference, see Stacey Philbrick Yadav, “The Houthis’ ‘Sovereign Solidarity’ with Palestine,” Middle East Research and Information Project, Issue 309, January 24, 2024.

dn From top to bottom, the U.S. government has been quite candid that deterring the Houthis was unlikely, but degrading their arsenal was still worthwhile. For the most senior enunciation of this position, see President Joe Biden's blunt admission here: Oren Liebermann and Nikki Carvajal, “Biden concedes Houthis haven't been deterred from carrying out attacks as US launches further strikes,” CNN, January 18, 2024.

do No one has yet ventured a comprehensive cost assessment of the Red Sea closure, but if one looks back to the closure of the Suez due to the Ever Given's 2021 blockage of the canal, that incident had a \$416 million per hour impact. Though workarounds have been found in the current crisis, the costs of the current crisis are likely to be in the tens of billions of dollars. See “Ever Given' ship stuck in the Suez Canal cost the economy \$400M an hour,” LMA Consulting Group, March 27, 2024. See also Mary-Ann Russon, “The cost of the Suez Canal blockage,” BBC, March 29, 2021, and Gregory Brew, “How—and Why—Yemen's Houthi Rebels Are Poised to Seriously Disrupt the Global Economy,” *Time*, December 19, 2023.

dp Houthi mention of hypersonic anti-shipping missiles is a recognition that this capability, which could be deployed in a test-bed environment in Yemen by the Iranians, is potentially a harbinger of things to come. “Houthis warn new ‘hypersonic missile’ will target Cape of Good Hope bound shipping,” Arab News, March 15, 2024.

dq If a similar-sized drone swarm as that fired on October 19, 2023, toward Israel were directed against every PLC command post on a certain frontline, a paralyzing blow might be struck that could enable Houthi land offensives to achieve heretofore unachievable breakthroughs.

movement that offer potential coercive mechanisms to the forces seeking to contain Ansar Allah. Isolation and splintering within the axis of resistance is one threat: Hamas, a contemporary of the Houthis, may be eviscerated by Israel without the axis having effectively prevented that outcome, which is a cautionary tale for the Houthis. Though Ansar Allah is undoubtedly more valuable to the Iranian and Lebanese core of the axis than it was before the war, it is nonetheless still peripheral to the main Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon bloc and might be isolated by an energetic and patient maritime interception effort. The Houthis have also been revealed as aggressors to many international observers who previously viewed them as victims—the David to Saudi Arabia’s Goliath in the post-2015 conflict. The Houthis were redesignated as an SDGT by the United States and are now seen as endangering peace, stability, and the marine environment in the region, with a sharpened focus

on their ties to Iran and their egregious human rights record.¹⁹¹ This will make it harder¹⁹² for the Houthis—though not impossibly hard—to once again weaponize the fear of famine in Yemen, as they did in 2018-2020 to shut down the Saudi-led coalition’s promising Red Sea coast offensive.¹⁹³ As a result, the Houthis may emerge more vulnerable to information operations and to broad-based economic sanctions, which can add to their isolation and internal security challenges. In the author’s long view of watching the Houthi movement grow, the threat they fear most—and thus the ultimate form of exploitable leverage and deterrence—is the risk of the frontline military balance turning against Ansar Allah. If the Houthis continue to become more isolated, the PLC partners could, probably after a formal peace deal, find themselves better supported by the United States and other players as a proxy to contain and deter Houthi expansionism. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Colonel (Ret.) Miri Eisin, Director, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT)

By Sean Morrow and Asher Spain

Retired Colonel Miri Eisin is the Director of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University in Herzliya, Israel. Miri has a deep background in the intelligence, security, and diplomacy worlds, and is a frequent commentator on these issues in world media. During her 20 years in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), she served in a variety of positions, including the intelligence officer of a regional border brigade, the intel officer of the Israeli airborne division, and the assistant to the Director of Military Intelligence. As a full colonel, she served as the Deputy Head of the Combat Intelligence Corps. In all her positions, she was the first woman to serve in such a capacity.

After retiring from the military, Eisin served as the Israeli government spokesperson during the Second Lebanon War in 2006, and as international press secretary to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

CTC: Tell us a little bit about the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism's mission and how your service in the Israeli military and government prepared you to lead this organization.

Eisin: The International Institute for Counter-Terrorism [ICT] was established almost 30 years ago. Its mission is to look at both terrorism and counterterrorism as both an academic disciplinary that can impact and evolve into policy and making all of the practitioners do a better job. It was 'invented,' if that's the right term, before 9/11 in the mid-1990s with that idea of bringing into the room all of the interdisciplinary aspects that have to do with countering the terrorist threats in the world. Our main mission today is making the terrorism threat clear and trying to put together policy ideas and answers for counterterrorism practitioners.

I come from a very military background, [specifically] military intelligence. I had a lot of diverse positions within the Israeli defense forces, mainly in intel positions: S2 of a brigade, G2 of a division of our Israeli airborne division, in the research departments. I think that what I bring in is on the one hand, the practitioner's background, meaning I was inside in those arenas where you need to act. But I've been out of that for a long time, and I really do feel that what we grow inside as practitioners is something that we also need to look at from the outside. It's to help and to make the practitioners even better. Maybe we can look at things differently.

And I really do feel that stepping into this position, I kid you not, on Sunday, October 8th, it's not exactly the thing that I would wish on anybody in the sense that all of our approach to terror—terror tactics, terror armor, all the terms we use—and towards counterterrorism—how we responded or did not respond—everything is so shaken right now. I really do feel that I'm stepping in at a time when it is helpful to bring in new ideas that are pertinent

and will help us face the challenges better in the future.

CTC: ICT, for years on the anniversary of 9/11, has organized one of the world's largest and best annual conferences on counterterrorism, that brings together scholars and practitioners from around the world. This year, you'll move that to October, which is a very important symbolic move. Can you talk about these gatherings and how they create increased collaboration, smarter counterterrorism, and just strengthening allies?

Eisin: When you're talking about counterterrorism, it's not a singular event. Israel is at the forefront. So is the United States. But if you go down the 198 countries, they all have challenges, even if they each approach it differently. The International Conference every year at ICT—and it's a conference that's been around for over 20 years, that's a very long time—it started before 9/11. And as 9/11 was from our perspective the worst, most horrific terror attack until October 7, we held our conference in September to reflect on that horrific attack, to understand what it meant. Boaz Ganor, the founder of ICT and now the president of Reichman University, and I decided at the beginning of November that it would be helpful to lean on our network—all of these practitioners, together with academics, both police and the military, together with different types of governmental officials to figure out how to better contend with terror including what we were wrong about.

At the conference, we'll bring people together and talk about these different challenges: What has changed? What surprised us? What surprised us may surprise others in the future. Let's think about that. Let's not be surprised again. What will the next surprise be because we missed this one? Just like in that sense 9/11 was unprecedented, now 10/7 is, and the conference will be about bringing in the practitioners, the academics, the governments from all over and putting them together, thinking about it, talking about it, and going out with new ideas. You can't do that just by writing in journals. At the conference, everybody comes together, and it is really in that sense a very unique place to be.

CTC: You've spent much of your career thinking about terrorism threats. Talk us through that difficult day of October 7.

Eisin: Just like every single person on 9/11, you can ask any Israeli, 'Where were you?' For Israelis with October 7th, it's a series of moments. It isn't just when the first plane hit and the second plane hit. It's the siren. Where were you when the sirens went off? Because the attack itself was a multi-tiered attack that we're trying now to conceptualize because it brought about a new kind of *modus operandi*. But on the personal note, the siren goes off. To understand how wrong I was, my husband and my kids and I were like, 'Is that the beginning of an attack by Hezbollah?' Because in the

years before, all of us were waiting for a very similar kind of attack to be carried out by Hezbollah in the north. So when the sirens initially went off, we're like, 'Is that Hezbollah?' We immediately saw that it was from the south, and we did not understand what it was.

Stage number two is that by 8:20am, I had a much better grasp of what was going on because of what we had looked at for five years: Hezbollah practicing with their Radwan forces up north. The concern was they would launch a multi-force, multi-pronged [attack] from the air, the land, and the sea entering into the communities and villages, attacking simultaneously and taking hostages.

You take that scenario and by 8:20 [you immediately] understood that that's the scenario that's happening down south, only nobody was prepared for it down south. Nobody was looking at it down south. And it's that sense of this is not really happening. The third stage—that I don't think you can really understand overseas—is for the next two to three and almost four days, Hamas literally occupied an area inside our state. They didn't do it and plant a flag. They didn't come in necessarily intending to do so, but they physically occupied. They were in 25 different communities, five different military bases, and we had to reoccupy it.

There were two things that on October 7th absolutely surprised me. One was the military breadth of the planning of what was a military terror attack: to simultaneously do rockets, missiles, air assaults under that cover. This is a new kind of *modus operandi*. It is not the same as what ISIS did in Syria and Iraq. We're talking here about a quasi-state element that has ruled over a territory for over 15 years that prepared this. It's a ragtag army, but the plan in itself was a very structured plan that you understand immediately in hindsight.

The second thing that shocked me to the core that I still can't grasp, is the unthinkability of it. Why do I say unthinkability? I could not think of the kind of atrocities they did. As terrorism and counterterrorism experts, you have to understand the other side. You have to think like the other side. That's part of how you counter it. But it was unthinkable. We knew atrocities were committed by ISIS against the Yazidis, yet none of us here projected that onto a potential attack. Not by Hezbollah, not by Hamas. So that's the unthinkability.

When you don't train troops to expect atrocities, when they meet the atrocities, it absolutely impacts their capability to respond. And the worst day in the State of Israel on October 7th was the aspect of what happened to the first responders. Because overwhelmingly, the 300 military and police that were killed on October 7th were the first responders, and everybody's like, 'Why were they not able to do more?' According to those who survived, when they came in, they weren't expecting the military capabilities, because Hamas built a military plan. They did ambushes, and the first responders weren't expecting that. When you go in and you see an Israeli soldier's body whose head has been cut off, and you recognize that it's the uniform, no head ... how do you continue to fight? Do you just ignore that? There's a huge difference when you see somebody on your own who's been injured. That's one of those things that you train a lot for: You're supposed to take care of the injured and go forward. And so when I talk about our immediate military response to October 7th, I'm saying, 'In training, I hate to tell you, we have to start teaching people this because it already makes a difference by thinking about the unthinkable.'

CTC: You touched on it a little bit, specifically with the unthinkability and the broad, massive scale of the conflict. But prior to your role at ICT, you served in a variety of senior intelligence positions, and October 7th was perhaps the biggest intelligence failure in the history of Israel, on par with U.S. failures prior to 9/11. From your perspective, what went wrong, and what lessons can be learned?

Eisin: I'm going to tell you a story and then I'm going to answer. October 6 was the 50-year anniversary of the outbreak of the 1973 Day of Atonement War. We immigrated to Israel in '71, and I have memories of the 1973 war. I was in 6th grade, and my dad was drafted in the 1973 war. He was away for like four months. I know friends whose parents were killed. For me, it's something from the past, but what Israel had done in this very complex year of 2023 is in the months leading up to the 50-year anniversary, there was a lot going on, educational-wise, about 50 years since the 1973 war. And one of the biggest education endeavors was happening inside Israeli military intelligence because the colossal failure of military intelligence before October 6th, 1973, allowing on October 6 two full, standing conventional armies to attack Israel simultaneously at two in the afternoon on the Day of Atonement, and basically, nobody saw it coming. I mean, yes, a few knew, but nobody did anything.

I mention that because on Thursday, October 5th, 2023, I was doing a lot of speaking as an officer: 'What have we learned?' Because I'm a different generation. I was a kid in the '73 war, but my military intelligence career was very impacted by the military intelligence failure of 1973. We were taught all sorts of different aspects that you look not just at intentions but at capabilities, because it's very difficult to know what the intentions are. So maybe you think they don't mean to do so, but if they have the capability to do so, you may have to have a different kind of posture. On the other hand, you can't build your defense posture based on all of the capabilities, because then we won't have anything in Israel except for bomb shelters and military units. It's always that balance. It's about early warning, how you do early warning.

I say all of this because in Israel, we were talking a lot about these issues and the need for early warning, but it was all about military adversaries in the region and Hezbollah. But not about Hamas. It was never mentioned by me nor by anybody else. On October 5th, 2023, in the evening, I was asked to participate in a TV live panel: three retired colonels and the panel itself was about 50 years since the intelligence failure of the 1973 war. I was asked the first question: 'Could the failure of October 6, 1973, happen again?' And on October 5th, 2023, at 7:15 in the evening, live on TV, I said, 'Absolutely. Tomorrow morning.'

There was a big conference recently at Tel Aviv University about the methodology of intelligence, and I was on a panel which was talking about failures in the intelligence. It's something that we're talking about a lot here. It's important to recognize that you can always fail. You can fail because we don't think like a terrorist. But I'm aware that I don't think like a terrorist. That's the blind spot in that sense where I know I don't think like them, so I try to think my way out of that. In this case, there was an overall failure at all levels in which everybody was looking at Hamas in a similar way—basically, group think. Not only was there an underestimation of Hamas capabilities, everyone was wrong that Hamas didn't have the intention to carry out such an attack.



Colonel (Ret.) Miri Eisin

If somebody would ask me now, I would say that October 7th could happen again. Just like October 6th, 1973, the exact same scenario won't happen, that one we know. And 9/11 won't happen again because that one you know. Terrorism is inventive. Militaries are inventive. That's part of the whole art of war in that sense. And you need to be aware of the gap, that you can be surprised, which is why you always need to have a certain amount of forces because you don't know how you're going to be surprised.

We were too reliant on technology in our defenses. Because they took out the technological capabilities at the beginning of the attack, and that helped them very much in creating the chaos of that first day of that infiltration/invasion/attack. I don't know what to call it because I have not seen a *modus operandi* like that before from a terror organization, and they're not really a military organization, but they did something military, while also using terror tactics.

The last thing I'll say is that in special operations, especially in all of my military career, one of the things that I always found is that it's amazing how people don't see the elephant in the room because they don't think that there's supposed to be an elephant in the room. Again, these are built-in blind spots. It means that we have to call it out more. We have to look at this issue more as it was at the center of the intelligence failure. All of us made wrong assumptions, and the combination of all of them brought about a colossal failure. There were many incorrect assumptions, not one. We collectively were wrong about the capability. We were wrong about the intentions. We were wrong about the ferocity.

We were all surprised by their use of motorcycles and the pickup trucks. But of course, we knew they had motorcycles and pickup trucks. Why weren't we looking at that? We knew they'd been practicing at this forever. They showed different places where they were practicing. Why didn't we connect the dots? In hindsight, you're always smart. We're still trying to understand what went wrong. It was a colossal failure of the intelligence, on the operational

side, and also of the decision-making at the top level. In this sense, it's not the same at all as 9/11. I want to be very clear. The colossal failure is not like 9/11. Israel has a border with the Gaza Strip. We have an enmity relationship with that quasi-state over there. We have had a very long-term policy towards Hamas, meaning it's in *that* context we also made so many mistakes.

CTC: As you have already noted, the scale and the brutality of 7 October took a lot of people by surprise. Can you just speak to that as you sit at that boundary of practitioner and scholar?

Eisin: Speaking to the scale, on October 7th some 1,135 people were murdered inside Israel. The early numbers that came out was because there were so many bodies and they counted some of the terrorist bodies. Some of the terrorists were wearing Israeli uniforms. That identification has taken a long time.

When it comes to the brutality, Hamas is a terror organization based inside the Muslim Brotherhood; it's not the Islamic State, al-Qa`ida, nor has it previously behaved like them, so I think that we were all taken aback, appalled, surprised. It was totally just unthinkable in that sense. The level of atrocities and brutality. What I assess now and didn't understand then, is that Hamas over the last few years became both more extreme religiously and also took tactics from ISIS into its paramilitary structure. This is the first time ever for us in the 75 years of Israel that we have seen sexual violence being used as weapon of war against us, when it comes to the atrocities that were committed. Now, I'm a practitioner academic and am well aware that in many conflicts—World War II, the conflicts in Africa, Russia, Ukraine—sexual violence is used as a tool of war. We all know this, right? But it was never in our arena.

On October 7, Hamas for the first time used the very extreme jihadi terror tactics we saw used extensively by the Islamic State against the Yazidis. Why as an intelligence community in Israel were we not thinking that this could be a possibility? We did not see that change in Hamas. Right now, what I'm trying to learn is why weren't we looking at it, why weren't understanding it? And one of the questions that's coming up for us right now is, 'OK, so are Hezbollah different?' Because when we've been doing war game scenarios for a military-style attack by air, land, and sea by Hezbollah, we've addressed the possibility that they may attack communities and carry out kidnappings. Just not the brutality.

CTC: Hezbollah's arsenal is publicly estimated to be up to 150,000 rockets and missiles to include precision long range.¹ It's a much greater security threat to Israel than Hamas ever was. And since 7 October, about 80,000 Israelis have had to flee the north, and there's concern that Hezbollah could launch a surprise cross-border attack similar to October 7th.² What are your views about the challenge posed by Hezbollah right now and some courses of action available to protect against those threats?

Eisin: We're six months into a war. Israel and Hezbollah are at war. I state that categorically. Apart from a very brief lull during the ceasefire in Gaza, Hezbollah has attacked Israel every single day from October 8th. Every single day. Sometimes a dozen times. Sometimes two times. We're talking physically attacking inside the state of Israel with that vast array of weaponry that they have. So this isn't about a future war that could happen. We're already in it.

It's limited. It's in a limited arena, but each side broadens every once in a while. Hezbollah during the first month or two was attacking into Israel with all the different type of weaponries but into a limited area. Five to seven kilometers from the border. And that brought about both the planned evacuation and unplanned evacuation of almost 40 different communities. The city of Kiryat Shmona, they're living in other places because you can't live in proximity to the border right now because Hezbollah is firing in.

Israel initially retaliated, meaning they fired and we fired back. Israeli tactics have changed up north, and here, I am saying tactics that are part of a strategy. For the first month and a half, we were very, very involved with what was happening down in the Gaza Strip against Hamas. But Israel then changed its approach on the Northern Front to preemption to prevent Hezbollah from defining the rules of the game. It can't be that they define what goes on; we will preempt. Preempting means one, attacking Hezbollah units not after they fire, but *before* they fire. That takes enormously accurate intelligence. Two, it means doing this not just in the limited arena that Hezbollah gets to define, but where Israel wants to do so, which means it's not just right next to the border. It's a bit further in. It's not just further in; it's in Beirut. It's not just further in and in Beirut, it's in the Beqaa Valley, and it's in Syria. And the upping of that stage is the fact that at the end, all of the capabilities that Hezbollah has from A-Z period come from the Iranian regime. And then there is the connection between Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards through the Quds Force and the Supreme leader himself.

So, Hezbollah attacked us, and we're not letting them define the rules. We're defining the new rules. The Iranian regime, Quds Force, and the different Iranian and Hezbollah elements both in Syria and Lebanon are not going to define what happens. And Israel went on to preemption. It's a military response, but it has strategic implications. We're living them right now because Israel in December and January already killed top Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Persian-speaking generals sitting in Damascus, who were responsible for the transfer of the logistics to Hezbollah, which means all of the weaponry. The general who was killed in Damascus on April 1—Mohammad Reza Zahedi—was the highest-ranking that Israel has ever taken out; [that] also contributed towards changing the rules of the game.³

Hezbollah until now have had 290 and climbing Hezbollah terror fighter casualties. And Hezbollah, very different from Hamas, have been publicly acknowledging every single one of them. They put it out on their social media, with the photograph and where they're from in Lebanon. And it's fascinating [as an] academic as I look at this, because I need to understand why, when Hezbollah was fighting for Bashar Assad, in the decade fighting in the war in Syria, Hezbollah would never publish any of their casualties, and our estimates were always that a good 1,000 Hezbollah terror fighters were killed in Syria. But you never knew. Every once in a while, you'd see there's a funeral here. It was all very low key. But in this conflict, in their minds they're fighting for al-Quds, a much more important battle than that in Syria. That's what really concerns me. Hezbollah is talking with Hamas, and suddenly, we are dealing with Hamas-Hezbollah, with both connected to the regime in Iran.

The Hezbollah threat is Hamas on steroids. It's the best trained Iranian proxy. It's not 15,000 rockets, it's 150,000 rockets. It's the guided capabilities, the distance. The range of Hezbollah missiles cover the entire length and breadth of the state of Israel. They can fire 5,000 rockets a day for a lot of days. They can fire in hundreds

“All of us made wrong assumptions, and the combination of all of them brought about a colossal failure. ... We collectively were wrong about the capability. We were wrong about the intentions. We were wrong about the ferocity.”

of drones/UAVs at a time. And how much can our military capacity stop, prevent, intercept? Will our military be able to protect civilians? Hezbollah will do it at the same time on all of the cities.

CTC: We talked about Hezbollah and their direct threat to you on your border. Can you talk about just a little bit about their external operations capability and interests?

Eisin: Hezbollah named their special forces Radwan Force after Imad Mughniyeh, their top terrorist who was killed in February 2008 in the heart of Damascus. Hezbollah, of course, blamed Israel at the time, and they named the Radwan Force after him. His code name was 'Radwan.' The force was only established after Imad Mughniyeh was killed, and I say 'in his honor' but it's also to commemorate the fact that he was the top terror military planner. He is the one who planned and executed attacks against U.S. Marines and against French Marines and against an endless number of Israelis and Jews around the world. As I said, [he was] killed in 2008, and the force that they built is to me the new type of terror military forces that we need to be looking at worldwide because both Hezbollah and Hamas are like these hybrid armies. They build militaries that have a military-type of command with an enormous amount of weaponry, but they add in those terror tactics that no normal military would ever even think of doing, as they're unthinkable. What they've built is a force of thousands of ... I don't like using the word 'soldiers' because they're terrorists, but they are very well-trained military terrorists who have a lot of capability. It's like having an elite infantry force that is on motorcycles and pickup trucks, similar perhaps to what we saw with ISIS, but ISIS was not an elite military-trained force. Here, we're talking about an elite military-trained force that's been trained for years [and] what it's supposed to do is something similar to what Hamas did on October 7.

In hindsight, the Hamas Nukhba Force^a was pretty well trained up to a point. But Hezbollah has more military-trained terrorists than Hamas ever had. And they are Lebanese Shiites. They live in the villages that are along the border with Israel.

They have some of the same weaponry as Hamas, but they have way more because they have ATGMs [anti-tank guided missiles]. They have way more short- and long-range guided missiles and a variety of different types of drones/UAVs with different type

a Editor's Note: The Nukhba force, Hamas' commando unit, spearheaded the October 7 attack on Israel. See, for example, "Ministers okay prison visit to October 7 Hamas terrorists by foreign monitors," *Times of Israel*, April 25, 2024.

of payloads mainly come from Iran's military industry. Over the past six months, they've used them to attack military installations in Israel. They put out the videos to show that they're doing so, meaning they're filming the attack. They're putting out videos showcasing their advanced anti-tank missiles, the ones that have the viewers. It's an Iranian production of a Russian prototype that they're using. So we're talking third generation-type missiles that they're using, and then they're putting out the footage so it's also information warfare.

When it came to the Hamas attack on October 7, we saw only—I can say the word 'only'—1,500 to 2,000 Nukhba terror soldiers because after that, a lot of riffraff came in—very barbaric riffraff down south. But Hezbollah has 5,000 Radwan military-trained forces, and they pose a potentially very dangerous threat when it comes to a ground attack. What Israel has been demanding is that all of the Radwan Forces move north away from the border. Easier said than done. I can think of no international force anywhere in the world, except for Israel, who actually will implement that. Because the people live there. How exactly do you get them to not be there next to the border?

CTC: Do you think that Hezbollah has interests or capabilities to do anything in Europe or Latin America?

Eisin: Hezbollah is already in Europe and Latin America. It's also in Asia (Malaysia, Indonesia) and Africa. As a research institution I think we need to focus more on the Hezbollah threat in Europe. We're seeing Hamas cells now in Europe.⁴

CTC: I'd like to jump to a question about information operations and just how important they've been in the current conflict. Can you talk about the state of Israel and the IDF, and what they're doing to shape the narrative of what's going on?

Eisin: So sadly, I'm going to say that to me, the one part that we're doing very, very poorly and that I think that Hamas and Hezbollah but more so Hamas within the Palestinian world are doing very well is in the information warfare.

As part of and following the October 7 attack, Hamas has waged information warfare. And what Hamas did is essentially it put out two parallel narratives. The narratives were pushed out in different social medias. One narrative was to terrorize the people of the State of Israel whereby Hamas used the social media platforms of their victims, broadcasting people's murder to their friends via Facebook Live.

On October 7th, 1,135 Israelis were killed; 25,000 Israelis witnessed with their own eyes murder down south, but [an] additional 150,000 people saw via social media murder live, and again, that was the terrorizing aspect. This was planned and then executed.

Hamas has also put out a parallel narrative out on social media platforms in Arabic on Telegram and WhatsApp that were overwhelmingly either footage from GoPros together with what can be called 'quasi journalists' that came in with them to put out a certain narrative. The aim of that narrative was to inspire their supporters because it showed the humiliation of the Israelis.

Information warfare is something we do poorly as a country because we think we're right and everybody else is wrong, so that we don't necessarily think we have to explain. Or more correctly,

“The added aspect of institutes like ICT is that with everybody fighting a war, even though we're all in trauma, we're trying to bring in new ideas. We can't just dwell on how we were so colossally wrong, but we also need to think about how we can better meet the challenge of the moment, for example by harnessing the power of technology in our warfighting.”

we think we'll just explain it, and you'll understand. We also made a lot of mistakes that have to do with our explaining. And we were so overwhelmed by the atrocities of October 7th, and as it went on and we said all sorts of things, the gap between the two narratives has only gotten broader.

And this brings me to what [we] can provide at ICT. We can help properly frame the narrative. What Hamas puts out is 'we the oppressed are going against the oppressor. We who have been humiliated are now humiliating the other side.' But this mistakes the reality. When you sit and read Hamas' charter, like I did again on Saturday afternoon, October 7th, you remember that in their charter, in addition to everything else, there is horrific antisemitism, hate, [and] racism.

CTC: What lessons do you think Israel has learned from the current conflict?

Eisin: As of now, we haven't yet. I say it sadly. We are a country in trauma, and trauma does not help learning. We'll get there. It's more than the 136 hostages. It's the 136 hostages that have families and friends. It's that circle. At this stage, we've had something like 1,650 Israelis and servicemembers that have been killed in the last six months, and that's an additional circle. It's that we're fighting every single day, not just against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, but also against Hezbollah, let alone that we're all aware of the fact that the Houthis are firing at us and Hezbollah and Iraq are firing at us and Shia militias in Syria are firing at us.

I think that the added [value] of institutes like ICT is that with everybody fighting a war, even though we're all in trauma, we're trying to bring in new ideas. We can't just dwell on how we were so colossally wrong, but we also need to think about how we can better meet the challenge of the moment, for example by harnessing the power of technology in our warfighting.

CTC: You mentioned technology in your answer. Both the conflict within Israel and Gaza and Ukraine and Russia has seen a massive increase in use of drones, including household drones. How do you see intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance using drones evolving?

Eisin: The drones are something that you can buy on the shelf anywhere. Go online and buy yourself a household drone. As you

say, Hamas' initial attack on Saturday used them extensively both as suicide drones and as reconnaissance. They used a lot of them, because it's a very easy way to amplify the impact of an attack. You put a payload on it, and it has the capability to go somewhere and then you land it onto a target and it explodes. Hezbollah has such drones on steroids.

For our Israeli forces, drones are an 'eye over the hill.' One of the most important things that we learned in Israel and this horrible war in the Gaza Strip is that the most important part is terrain analysis, so you know what you are looking at. When it comes to the combat intelligence level, this war has been an enormous success in terms of the capabilities that that have been brought to bear in targeting, and I say that acknowledging the fact that Israeli forces have unintentionally killed many uninvolved civilians.

CTC: The campaign since 7 October has fractured Hamas and removed thousands of terrorists from the battlefield. But as you note, it has also exacted a heavy civilian toll. Can you address these costs and their impact?

Eisin: In answering this question, it's important to note that Hamas was a quasi-state that was in the Gaza Strip, that built for itself two military tiers of defense. [The first] everybody knows because that's what you do in counterinsurgency. It's the urban arena itself; that's part of their tier of defense. But what Hamas also did is that they built the subterranean arena [in a way] that there is no equivalent of that we know of right now. But it has been very successful. It's going to be copied.

I think that what Israel tried to do as a military was to say, 'OK, the civilians are in the urban area. I am going to attack the Hamas military capabilities. I will tell the civilians to leave.' We did that in the northern Gaza Strip. A million people were told to leave; 800,000 left, 200,000 didn't. Now you get to the military question of what you do. The military said, 'We told them to leave and now we're going in.' And we killed a lot of civilians. Every single time we went into a new neighborhood, into a new arena, we gave early warning. It's counterintuitive to what you normally do as a military. So you say, 'I'm giving them early warning and yet they didn't leave.' I don't have a moral dilemma because we had to destroy Hamas'

capability. They cannot be allowed to be able to do a combined, multi-tiered assault of the type that they did on October 7th. But before going in, I'm going to tell them to leave again. I'm going to tell them to leave again, and if they don't leave, I'm going to kill the terrorists. And I'm going to be unintentionally killing uninvolved civilians. I won't target them. I never target them.

I don't know if the Hamas numbers are correct, but we've killed thousands of civilians. And there's an accumulation of numbers there, but I do not know of any other way there would have been to destroy the capabilities, and again, they are holding our hostages. They've never told us where the hostages are and how they are. It isn't just about destroying the capabilities; it's destroying the capabilities, *and* we need to get the hostages back.

I have been openly critical of Israeli policies when it came to the humanitarian crisis, because I, in the Institute in November, we prepared a paper that I presented from defense minister down and everybody could agree with the concept. But this Israeli government would not agree with this. I wasn't the only voice there, but we said, 'Do everything that you're asked to in the humanitarian sphere because it's going to come back and bite you in the butt if you don't do everything you can.' Initially, Israel cut off the water to Gaza for like 48 hours. And that's where I came and I said, 'Are you guys crazy? That's collective punishment. You're going to lose [international support].' Some of the Israeli ministers made very clear-cut statements that we were cutting off the water, including the defense minister. I was like, 'You don't cut off water to people.'

CTC: When you think about the next terrorist threat in Israel, what keeps you up at night?

Eisin: I'm actually worried right now about a threat in which antisemitism meets the far-left meets the far-right and which casts Israel as a world pariah and therefore targets Jews and Israelis or anyone who supports them anywhere. I think that there's going to be a tough war against Hezbollah and we need to prepare for the repercussions of that. I'm also worried about this narrative emerging that legitimizes terrorism and casts the sovereign state of Israel as illegitimate. That's the one that keeps me up because I don't see how we contend with it at all. **CTC**

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The State of al-Qa`ida Central

By Kévin Jackson

More than a year and a half after the killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul, al-Qa`ida Central has yet to acknowledge the demise of its emir and announce his replacement. After having lost its franchises in Iraq and Syria and after having seen its hegemony on the global jihadi scene hollowed out, the organization now operates without a declared leader, a first in its history. Coupled with the protracted absence of operational success of its own, this track record reinforces the widespread notion that al-Qa`ida Central has become and will remain irrelevant. However, while the challenges facing the group are real, it should not be written off, as it has proved time and again more resilient than expected and can still count on its longstanding network of affiliates and followers to survive and potentially reverse its fortunes.

Ever since the Taliban returned to power in mid-August 2021, the strength of al-Qa`ida Central and the international threat it poses have been much debated topics, entailing contrasting assessments. In its latest reports about the global jihad threat, the United Nations' Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team maintained that the organization was in the process of "rebuilding operational capability" in Afghanistan, considering the latter a "safe haven" for its recruitment and external planning efforts.¹ Benefiting from its "close relationship" with the Taliban regime, the organization is said to have quietly developed its infrastructure in the country, establishing training and housing facilities in eastern and southern areas. Estimated at between "30 to 60" operatives, al-Qa`ida's core cohort in Afghanistan is assessed by these reports as currently unable to "project sophisticated attacks at long range," although the group remains "a threat in the region, and potentially beyond," especially over the long term.²

These views are far from the consensus. U.S. officials criticized some of the U.N. reporting, stating that "these numbers are wildly out of whack with the best estimates of the U.S. intelligence community."³ In the summer of 2023, U.S. senior officials claimed that al-Qa`ida "simply has not reconstituted a presence in Afghanistan since the U.S. departure in August 2021," with only "fewer than a dozen core members" based in the country.⁴ According to U.S. intelligence, al-Qa`ida is now "at an historical low point in Afghanistan ... and its revival (is) unlikely," having "lost target access, leadership talent, group cohesion, rank-and-file commitment, and an accommodating local environment."⁵ In this light, the Taliban's Afghanistan resembles more of "a nursing home for AQ seniors" than a stronghold from which the group could direct international attacks.⁶

Drawing on close examination of public and private materials from al-Qa`ida and historical research, this article aims to shed light on the current status of the central organization. The first section provides background on the group's current sanctuaries and personalities. The second section examines the complications facing al-Qa`ida relative to its main operational areas. The article then outlines the group's vision on international terrorist attacks. Finally, it investigates the nature of its relationship with the broader network of affiliates overseas.

Location of the Core

There is little doubt that, over the past decade, al-Qa`ida's membership in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Af-Pak) has experienced significant losses. As a result of U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts in the region, the group was deprived of many of its most seasoned figures and fighters. The central organization itself acknowledged as much, lamenting that the drone strike campaign had "inflicted major losses in the ranks of the mujahidin in Afghanistan [and] Waziristan," including "leaders and cadres."⁷

The high attrition rate left al-Qa`ida struggling to replenish its talent pool. The issue was compounded by the dwindling appeal of jihad in Afghanistan, eclipsed by the wave of enthusiasm caused by the Arab Spring within jihadi circles. Consequently, fewer new foreign volunteers came to the Af-Pak region, instead choosing to fight elsewhere, especially in Syria. As for al-Qa`ida's members in Waziristan, some ended up disillusioned as the organization was forced to become less active to preserve its ranks. "Brothers that are working they are getting killed, and for those who are not doing anything then why on earth are they still here," an American operative in the group's external wing bemoaned.⁸ The last straw was Pakistan's 2014 military intervention in North Waziristan, where al-Qa`ida had its headquarters. This led the central organization to proceed to "the nearly complete evacuation of the Waziristan arena and Pakistan," according to a leader in the group.⁹ In this light, it is safe to say that al-Qa`ida's longstanding core cadre in the region depleted substantially.

The group, however, has managed to retain a presence in its original safe haven. With the loss of its Pakistani sanctuary, part of its manpower relocated to Afghanistan, a shift initiated in 2010

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by its top leadership, including Usama bin Ladin. Back then, on account of the high number of “brothers” killed by drone strikes in Waziristan, the late leader of al-Qa`ida had ordered his men to leave Pakistan’s tribal areas for eastern Afghanistan, in Kunar and Nuristan provinces, as well as Ghazni and Zabul, in the country’s center and south.¹⁰

The move, completed in the wake of Islamabad’s 2014 offensive, turned Afghanistan from a front primarily used by field commanders and fighters into a territorial refuge for al-Qa`ida as a whole, including high-ranking leaders.¹¹ This underscores that if the 2021 U.S. withdrawal was likely seen by al-Qa`ida as a positive development for its future in Afghanistan, the group had not waited for this to shore up its presence in the country, especially in the south and east. Though the exact size of al-Qa`ida’s current cohort in Afghanistan remains unclear, it appears that the group has returned to its original numbers when it moved to Afghanistan in 1996, with around 60-70 core members based there currently, according to Aimen Dean, a spy for British intelligence inside al-Qa`ida from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, who received information on current numbers from sources in Afghanistan broadly aligning with the aforementioned U.N. estimate.¹²

Since the Taliban takeover, al-Qa`ida has continued to use Afghanistan as one of its main command and control hubs. This was best highlighted by the return of the group’s then emir al-Zawahiri to Kabul’s Wazir Akbar Khan, a neighborhood where he used to live with his family and associates prior to 9/11.¹³ Although the United States maintains that there are fewer than “a dozen core members” in the country, the aforementioned relocation process undercuts this claim. Further, at least one other major player is said to be based there. A Saudi national, Hamza al-Ghamidi used to lead bin Ladin’s security detail and helped found al-Qa`ida’s media arm, As-Sahab. Today, he is one of the most prominent leaders in the central organization, having served in its Shura council for over a decade.¹⁴

Besides Afghanistan, Iran represents al-Qa`ida’s other command center. Its importance significantly increased in the post-Waziristan era, with the arrival of a number of the group’s personnel there. In addition to these “newcomers,” several historical figures returned to the fold after years of detention in the country. These included Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Saif al-`Adl¹⁵ who, after their release in 2015, took a leading role in managing al-Qa`ida’s affairs in the region and beyond. Abu Muhammad was reportedly killed in Tehran in 2020.¹⁶ Al-`Adl, for his part, is believed to be still in Iran and to have assumed command since al-Zawahiri’s death.¹⁷ Described as the group’s “engineer,” ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Maghribi, al-Zawahiri’s son-in-law, appears as the second most senior element in the Iran-based cadre. In charge of As-Sahab since 2003, al-Maghribi then became part of al-Qa`ida’s Shura council before acting as its “general manager.” Long based in Pakistan’s tribal areas, the Moroccan national was among those who relocated to Iran a decade ago or so.¹⁸

Iran’s centrality for al-Qa`ida is further evidenced by the possible survival of other experienced figures like Abu ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Masri,

another member of the Shura council.^a In pre-9/11 Afghanistan, this Egyptian chemist-turned-explosives-expert had been tasked by al-Qa`ida with obtaining weapons of mass destruction and used to conduct “secret experiments” in his laboratory, researching making anthrax and using cyanide gas for terrorist operations. Keen on improving his skills in the field, he intended to travel overseas to re-enroll in university and pursue chemistry studies, only to have his plans canceled by bin Ladin for safety reasons.¹⁹

Aside from these top leaders, al-Qa`ida can rely on a number of more junior, yet noteworthy Arab elements operating between Afghanistan and Iran. These operatives, including a number from the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa dating back to the bin Ladin era, constitute a younger, lesser-known generation of cadres long groomed by their more infamous elders. Among these is Sultan al-‘Abdali.^b Initially engaged in one of al-Qa`ida’s combat brigades in eastern Afghanistan in the late 2000s, this Saudi national is currently active on the media front, having published several pieces for As-Sahab since 2017 under the *nom de plume* “Awab bin Hasan al-Hasani.”²⁰ Underlining his seniority, he is referred to as “Shaykh” inside al-Qa`ida, and one of his latest releases featured a foreword from al-Zawahiri and Abu Muhammad.^c

The Afghan and Iranian Challenges

Al-Qa`ida’s relocation to Afghanistan and Iran, coupled with the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban takeover, may have enabled the group to abandon its longtime “survival” mode and resume a functional routine. This more favorable environment notwithstanding, the central organization still has to face issues specific to each location.

In Afghanistan, the U.S. withdrawal and the fall of the Afghan government bereaved the group of an enemy to fight. Hence, it can no longer capitalize on the anti-occupation narrative it utilized during the two decades of war in Afghanistan to appeal to new recruits looking for armed jihad. This might prove problematic for the group’s recruitment prospects, especially with the younger constituencies primarily interested in fighting opportunities.

Al-Qa`ida’s fortunes will also hinge on its Taliban allies’ willingness and capacity to curtail its activities, the latter having pledged to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a launchpad for terrorist attacks.²¹ If the Emirate’s first iteration had failed to

a Abu ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Masri’s current status is unclear. While the United States maintains that the Egyptian is alive and well in Iran, AQAP’s senior leader Khubayb al-Sudani mentioned him as dead. See Khubayb al-Sudani, *Fragments of al-Qa`ida’s History*, June 30, 2023.

b Among the Abbottabad files reviewed by this author for this article was a letter penned by a Saudi signing as “Sultan al-‘Abdali ‘Qattal’ al-Jiddawi.” In January 2021, the United States designated Sultan Yusuf Hasan al-‘Arif, a Saudi also known as “Qattal al-‘Abdali.” Later that year, Asfandyar Mir stated that among al-Qa`ida’s senior leaders was a “Saudi citizen Awab bin Hassan al-Hassani, also known as Qahtal.” This author assesses that these different names and aliases refer to the same individual. There is contradicting information about his whereabouts. The United States places him in Iran. Mir, for his part, wrote that he relocated to Afghanistan. See Michael R. Pompeo, “United States Takes Action To Counter Iranian Support for al-Qa`ida,” U.S. Department of State, January 12, 2021. See also Asfandyar Mir, “Twenty Years After 9/11: The Terror Threat from Afghanistan Post the Taliban Takeover,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:7 (2021).

c Awab bin Hasan al-Hasani, “Surat al-‘Adiyat: The Inghimasi,” As-Sahab, September 10, 2023. This book is part of a series which al-‘Abdali/al-Hasani began writing more than 10 years ago, explaining that Abu Muhammad al-Masri and al-Zawahiri had time to add a foreword to it before their deaths in 2020 and 2022, respectively.



Saif al-`Adl in Afghanistan before 9/11. (Source: screen capture from a video exhibit available on the website of the Department of Defense's Office of Military Commissions)

contain the group, its subsequent downfall has certainly given the Taliban a strong incentive to enforce constraining regulations on their foreign brothers-in-arms, all the while sheltering and protecting them. Disregarding these restrictions would represent a big risk for al-Qa`ida. While it enjoys friendly relations with the Taliban's most influential circles, from its supreme leader to the Haqqani network, the group is well aware that other officials in the regime do not look so kindly on it. These include Afghanistan's Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Mullah Baradar, who has long been distrusted by al-Qa`ida's leaders, including bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri.²² In the wake of the Taliban takeover, Baradar is reported to have sought to hinder the organization in Afghanistan, an effort eventually opposed by the Taliban's top leader.²³

So far, al-Qa`ida has seemed willing to play ball for the sake of the Emirate's political standing, especially given that the Taliban had conferred with the group on the negotiations with the United States and that the central organization of al-Qa`ida had acquiesced to the wording of the Taliban's counterterrorism guarantees in the Doha agreement.²⁴ Al-Qa`ida's concessions to the Taliban can be seen in the group's media output, which carefully conceals its presence on Afghan soil, notably remaining silent over al-Zawahiri's death in Kabul. This, in turn, enables the Taliban to insist that the "organization has no presence in Afghanistan."²⁵ Notably, al-Qa`ida publicly stated that "our jihadi strikes against Zionist-Crusader America [have ceased] from the territory of Afghanistan," a first in

the group's history.^{26 d}

Yet, al-Qa`ida's current cautiousness does not mean that the group has no room for maneuver to remain active from Afghanistan and build up its capacities. It has already expressed interest in bringing back old timers into the fold.^e Further, the group seems keen to invest time and resources in training, with a focus on specialization, an effort which predates the Taliban return.²⁷ As was the case prior to 9/11, some al-Qa`ida members might end up supporting the Afghan emirate by assisting the Taliban in various

d A similar sentiment was voiced by members of AQIS to CNN in April 2021. They claimed that the organization "did not need Afghanistan [for future external operations] and there is no such intention in the future." See Nic Robertson and Saleem Mehsud, "Al Qaeda promises 'war on all fronts' against America as Biden pulls out of Afghanistan," CNN, April 30, 2021.

e This can be seen in Abu Muhammad al-Masri's book on the 1998 East Africa bombings. In it, the late Egyptian senior al-Qa`ida leader evoked the case of Ridha al-Tunisi, a Tunisian veteran of the anti-Soviet jihad and a founding cadre of al-Qa`ida. Arrested in Karachi in 2002, he was handed over to his home country in 2015. "We hope to see him soon in the fields of jihad to play his role in participating, advising and guiding the younger generations," Abu Muhammad wrote. See Abu Muhammad al-Masri, "The Road to Nairobi and Dar al-Salam," As-Sahab, August 2023.

fields on account of their skills and backgrounds.^f With regard to its activities in the broader region, the central organization will most likely rely on its brainchild, al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which, while opposed to opening a front in Pakistan, has expressed ambitions to initiate a campaign against India.²⁸

In Iran, al-Qa`ida's main hurdle has more to do with outside perception and legitimacy than pressure from the country's regime. To be sure, Tehran has at times cracked down on the group's network. Still, the Iran-based contingent enjoys relatively propitious conditions for its enterprise, being out of reach of drone strikes and benefiting from longstanding connections in the country.²⁹ The issue for the organization is that its enduring presence there has raised suspicions within the broader jihadi milieu, with some dreading the idea of a nexus between al-Qa`ida and Tehran, an actor widely castigated by jihadis for what they deem are its sectarian politics against Sunnis in Iraq, Syria, and the broader region.³⁰

Although the topic has always been a source of embarrassment for al-Qa`ida, it has become increasingly prevalent and costly over the past few years, as shown by the 2016-2017 crisis between the central organization and its then Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra during which the latter group progressively decoupled itself from al-Qa`ida. At the time, al-Nusra rebuffed what they perceived as the excessive influence of a quasi-detained duo, al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad, on the ground that the two were "present in an enemy country (Iran)" whereas al-Qa`ida's own protocols "stipulate that no one can enjoy competencies so long as he is not in one of the branches."³¹ The notion of a collusion or that al-Qa`ida's leaders were virtually detained by Tehran were dismissed by some of the group's officials. With regard to al-`Adl, they maintained, he was simply "prohibited from traveling," otherwise living an "ordinary life" and being "still free to undertake his jihadi work."³²

Despite al-Qa`ida's 'clarifications,' the topic was brought up again in the aftermath of al-Zawahiri's killing. As al-`Adl was reported to have taken over, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) senior leader Abu Mariya al-Qahtani (who was recently assassinated in Syria³³) derided the idea that someone living "under confinement and coercion" could "manage the affiliates of al-Qa`ida."³⁴ Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi also weighed in on the topic. The Jordanian jihadi scholar was adamant that al-Qa`ida "will not choose a leader unless he is in Khurasan [Afghanistan-Pakistan], Yemen, and so on," adding that it was "impossible for them to choose a leader in Iran or under the authority of any government."³⁵ Reflecting the legitimacy issue faced by al-Qa`ida, al-Maqdisi's stance is even more problematic because his opinion still matters to the group, which consults him for advice.³⁶ The central organization's controversial presence in Iran thus constitutes a serious challenge to its stature, leaving it vulnerable to further criticism from jihadi circles.

External Operations

Although al-Qa`ida claimed that it will no longer plan terrorist attacks from Afghanistan, this does not mean that the central

“When it comes to al-Qa`ida’s targeting priorities, the United States continues to feature on the top of the list.”

organization will renounce foreign activities altogether, far from it. The group has made it clear that it is very much committed to continuing the fight against the "far enemy," with its leaders considering external operations as paramount to further its agenda. Discussing terrorist attacks, al-`Adl posited that "the mujahideen must continue [to conduct] their large and small operations in order to achieve their goals," with a focus on political, military, and economic targets. In this realm, al-Qa`ida's presumptive emir favors "a successive series of operations accompanied by a media momentum that affects the psychology of the targeted segment ... giving the impression that there is no safe place and no end to assassinations and bombings."³⁷

Al-Qa`ida further telegraphed its intentions to be creative, notably by obtaining non-conventional weapons, including weapons of mass destruction. "Within a few years, jihadi movements could possess [these] weapons of deterrence," Abu Muhammad al-Masri wrote in 2019, adding that "at that point, the equation will change." To do so, the late Egyptian recommended "allocating budgets for experimental research in non-conventional weapons," "collaborating with scientists" as well as sending selected operatives "to enroll in distinguished scientific universities in the U.S., Europe and Asia," where they would study "physics, chemistry, and relevant specialities." Additionally, he suggested "studying aeronautical engineering" to develop a drone program "for assassination operations in urban environments."³⁸

Furthermore, al-Qa`ida has indicated that its hiatus on external operations from Afghanistan is only temporary, stressing that it was just "for now."³⁹ Here, it is worth remembering that even when the group had decided not to carry out major terrorist attacks during its days located in Sudan, it was still refining its external program, using "the opportunity that Sudan offered to do the groundwork for targeting several American and Jewish interests," according to Abu Muhammad, who added that "the execution of these plans remained on the Organization's watch list as the search was on for the appropriate theater for launching such operations."⁴⁰ Al-Qa`ida may thus capitalize on the opportunity offered by the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan to hone external projects while not acting upon them immediately. Al-`Adl has stated that "great leaders use the period of a truce or reconciliation" to "work on improving the conditions for the upcoming battle."⁴¹

Even if al-Qa`ida continues to hold off from launching attacks from Afghanistan, it has already disclosed that it intends to use other locations to orchestrate attacks, stating that "this blessed jihad against the Empire of Evil will continue from other parts of the world."⁴² These efforts to delocalize its operational capacity when faced with difficulties in a specific area have long been pursued by the group. For instance, as it was experiencing hardships in Waziristan during the late 2000s, al-Qa`ida attempted to shift its external program to other places deemed more accommodating, including Turkey, where it tried to establish an external wing.⁴³ It also looked to develop its capabilities from Iran, where it sent a group of external operatives in 2010 and from where it later plotted

^f According to U.N. reporting, this appears to be already the case: "With the patronage of the Taliban, Al-Qaida members have received appointments and advisory roles in the Taliban security and administrative structures." See "Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," United Nations Security Council, June 1, 2023.

with a Tunisian national to strike a rail link between Canada and the United States.⁴⁴

When it comes to al-Qa`ida's targeting priorities, the United States continues to feature on the top of the list. Al-`Adl maintains that "operations to target American interests in the entire Islamic world must be conducted, whether it is the occupying state or the one supporting a corrupt regime."⁴⁵ Similarly, Abu Muhammad argued that to weaken "the global leader of disbelief (America)," al-Qa`ida should strike "its military and economic interests." Among the targets he mentioned were American "military bases scattered throughout the Arab and Islamic world" as well as "embassies."⁴⁶

Aside from the United States, al-Qa`ida Central appears keen on striking Europe. Al-`Adl considers that al-Qa`ida's best chance to achieve some of its political goals might be to target "countries that are no longer influential in the world, such as France, Spain, and the United Kingdom, whose union is on the verge of dissolution."⁴⁷

In the group's European hierarchy, France stands out, being viewed by al-`Adl as among "the most dangerous allies" of the United States, together with the United Kingdom.⁴⁸ Largely driven by the Prophet cartoons controversy, the group's messaging dedicated output entirely devoted to France where it urged its audience to "give a befitting response to the French Crusaders who have spearheaded this vile campaign of blasphemy" and replicate the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack.⁴⁹

Scandinavian countries appear to be another top priority for the central organization in Europe. Last summer, in the wake of a series of Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Denmark, al-Qa`ida stated that "Sweden has chosen to take the lead in the war against Islam ... among the European Union countries, thus competing with France, Denmark and others for first position in the race for enmity to God."⁵⁰ The group threatened to attack the two Scandinavian countries as well as their interests and personnel abroad, including its embassies and diplomats.⁵¹

In the wake of the Gaza war, al-Qa`ida likely feels emboldened by what it perceives as a uniquely auspicious geopolitical context to further its global ambitions. Shortly after Hamas' October 7 onslaught on Israel, the group released a communiqué in which it called for a massive mobilization against "the Zionist enemy."⁵²

The group may seek to plot against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad, just like it did after the onset of the Second Intifada in late 2000. At the time, bin Ladin had sent a group of operatives to East Africa, from where they planned the 2002 Mombasa attacks.⁵³ It is also worth remembering that in 2001, while opposed to anti-U.S. attacks, the Taliban had allowed al-Qa`ida to mount anti-Jewish operations from Afghanistan.⁵⁴ Given the Emirate's stance on the Gaza war, al-Qa`ida may attempt yet again to obtain the Taliban's approval to gain more leeway in its external planning.

But al-Qa`ida's Gaza war communiqué clearly shows that the group will try to capitalize on "the opportunity of the century" primarily through attacks against U.S. and Western interests overseas, framing these as its way to support "our people in Palestine." This is reflected in the communiqué's targeting instructions, focused on striking "American bases, airports and embassies in our Islamic region," "Crusader battleships ... in the Muslim seas" as well as "Zionists" in Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco, all countries involved in the normalization process with Israel.⁵⁵

"In the wake of the Gaza war, al-Qa`ida likely feels emboldened by what it perceives as a uniquely auspicious geopolitical context to further its global ambitions."

Core and Franchises

Today, the al-Qa`ida brand no longer enjoys the prestige it had during the bin Ladin era. Having lost its Iraqi and Syrian affiliates, the central organization is now deprived of a foothold in these two major jihadi fronts, once its crown jewels. A decade ago, it had relocated numerous experienced operatives to Syria, only to see most of them killed by drone strikes. If some have survived, their activities have been largely curbed by HTS.⁵⁶ As for Iraq, the group is completely absent from the scene, owing to the Islamic State's monopoly.

However, the central organization of al-Qa`ida still maintains influence, having succeeded in retaining the loyalty of its other franchises in Yemen (al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP), the Sahara-Sahel (al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM), and Somalia (al-Shabaab). Due to the dispersed geography of the al-Qa`ida movement and operational security, the mothership cannot afford to "ask the leadership of the branches to refer to the central command in every matter," a core leader said.⁵⁷ Instead, it follows "a flexible style of management" with its subsidiaries, according to AQIM's current emir Abu `Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi.⁵⁸ Similar to the approach adopted during bin Ladin's tenure, the central organization "contents itself with outlining the general goals and broad lines of the strategy [to follow]" while leaving "the details of the action plan on the field" to its affiliates, each according to their own "circumstances and capacities," AQIM's emir added.⁵⁹ This framework has long been defined by the central organization's 2013 "General Guidelines for Jihadi Action" outlining the network's "general policy."⁶⁰

In addition to providing instructions and "keeping abreast of their track records," al-Qa`ida's leadership typically consults and seeks the opinion of its franchises on a range of issues. The "General Guidelines," for instance, were issued only "after consultation with the local branches of al-Qa`ida," according to al-Zawahiri.⁶¹ The Syrian experience, however, showed that the mothership was still keen on maintaining its executive powers by having the final say on strategic matters.⁶²

To convey its directives, the central organization resorts to its Iran-based "connections office" headed by al-Maghribi. "For many years we have been entrusted with connecting with all the branches and all sides," the office said in late 2017, specifying that they were the ones handling the correspondence to and from al-Qa`ida's top leadership. At the time, according to the office, it was "possible to connect with the external connections official on an almost daily basis."⁶³

The respective media teams of the core and the franchises also seem instrumental in maintaining contact between the various outfits. This media nexus was notably highlighted in a video released by As-Sahab in September 2021. In it, As-Sahab stated that clips featuring top leaders from both AQAP and AQIM had

been “recorded in cooperation” with the media crews of the two offshoots.⁶⁴ Conversely, al-Qa`ida Central’s members also appeared in its affiliates’ media productions.⁶⁵

Despite sustained lobbying from the Islamic State and others, these subsidiaries have made it clear that they will not leave behind the al-Qa`ida banner. Instead, the successive leaders of al-Qa`ida’s affiliates have repeatedly reaffirmed their allegiance and shown commitment to continue operating within the framework charted by the mothership. AQIM’s emir al-Annabi, for example, stated that even though the group had allied with other factions under the coalition Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), both AQIM and JNIM should be viewed as “a core component” of the broader movement led by al-Qa`ida Central.⁶⁶ This alignment with the mothership’s methodology was further illustrated by a lecture given by AQAP’s late emir Qasim al-Raymi in which he taught the “General Guidelines” to a class of AQAP members.⁶⁷

Projecting the image of a transnational movement under a general command, al-Qa`ida’s franchises have routinely stressed that their action was guided by the central leadership. When endorsing the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, AQAP underlined that while the group had planned the operation, they had done so “in compliance with ... the order of our general emir, the generous Shaykh ... al-Zawahiri.”⁶⁸ More recently, al-Qa`ida’s franchises furthered the unity narrative by carrying out a series of high-profile attacks against Western interests that they framed under the common slogan “Jerusalem will never be Judaized.” In their claims of responsibility, the groups emphasized that this campaign had been launched “in accordance with the guidelines of Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri ... in targeting Western and Zionist interests worldwide.”⁶⁹

Over the past decade, al-Qa`ida Central has been able to leverage these external fronts to ensure its survival in the face of security pressure in the Af-Pak region. If the Syrian experience largely failed, it is worth stressing that the group also dispatched part of its membership to Yemen, where they teamed up with AQAP and served in various capacities. However, this core cadre has experienced some attrition, especially from drone strikes.⁷⁰ A recent loss was that of al-`Adl’s son, Khalid, who is said to have been sent from Iran by his father.⁷¹ With these arrivals and the sustained presence of other core figures, including in AQAP’s top leadership, the central organization has likely secured a lasting legacy in the region.

As al-Qa`ida’s ability to project threats from Af-Pak was declining, these franchises proved key to ensure that the global brand remained relevant and to show that al-Qa`ida was still able to plan international attacks. When it comes to the last decade, AQAP has been the most active subsidiary in this field, as shown by the 2015 Charlie Hebdo and 2019 Pensacola attacks as well as the group’s numerous other external plots. The other franchise

active in external plotting in recent years is al-Shabaab, which notably planned a 9/11-style attack targeting the U.S. homeland that was foiled in 2019.⁷² Both Yemen and Somalia have long been viewed by the central organization as valuable locations from which global attacks could be staged. According to U.S. intelligence, the two affiliates “will continue to expand” and “sustain the global network as the group maintains its strategic intent to target the United States and U.S. citizens.”⁷³ This, in addition to AQAP’s and al-Shabaab’s experience in the international terror domain and the number of core elements in AQAP, may lead al-Qa`ida Central to lobby and subcontract these groups and their resources for future operations.

Conclusion

The ongoing lack of visibility surrounding al-Qa`ida Central’s inner workings makes it difficult to offer a definitive assessment about the group and its strength. Still, this article has shown that the group is intent on navigating a pathway rather similar to that once personified by bin Ladin, with its focus on the United States and its allies. Lacking a leadership symbolizing this new era, the organization seems to have prioritized security requirements and political considerations over media imperatives, even though it remains active on the propaganda front.

While many perceive al-Qa`ida as in permanent decline, it is worth remembering that over its 35 years of existence, the organization has gone through other times of turmoil that it ultimately managed to overcome, underlining its enduring resilience. Besides, if the number of its forces in Afghanistan might be low, the group can count on additional manpower in other places, from Iran to Yemen, ensuring multiple geographic options for the central organization to remain operational and further its transnational agenda.

Faced with overt criticism from jihadi circles and with no recent significant successful operations of its own (in Af-Pak and beyond) and no new absorptions of other jihadi groups, al-Qa`ida Central’s current leadership may feel renewed urgency to develop external plotting against Western targets, by its own means and/or through its subsidiaries. In addition to centrally planned plots, the central organization could resort to comparatively cheaper operations similar to the Pensacola attack. Its main hurdle here will pertain to its capacity to mobilize resources and qualified staff to devise new projects, factors which have long hindered its operational plans. At any rate, al-Qa`ida Central’s leaders have already signaled that they very much intend on continuing to plot terror against the United States and other far enemies. In the wake of the outrage across the Muslim world caused by the war in Gaza, taking ownership of successful high-profile attacks against Western targets may well be seen by these leaders as a way to renew al-Qa`ida Central’s relevance. **CTC**

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The Somali National Army Versus al-Shabaab: A Net Assessment

By Paul D. Williams

An important question for the future of Somalia is if the African Union withdraws the remainder of its forces from the country by December 31, 2024, would the Somali National Army (SNA) or al-Shabaab be stronger militarily? According to a net assessment conducted by the author across seven factors—size, material resources, external support, force employment, cohesion, psychological operations, and morale—the SNA would retain an advantage in terms of size, material resources, and external support but performs poorly on non-material dimensions and would remain dependent upon external finance and security assistance. Overall, however, al-Shabaab would be slightly militarily stronger because of its significant advantages across the non-material dimensions related to force employment, cohesion, and psychological operations, as well as the sustainability of its forces.

Now in its nineteenth year, the war against Harakat Shabaab al-Mujahidin is, by far, the deadliest African conflict involving Islamist militants.¹ After disintegrating during Somalia's civil war in the late 1980s, the Somali National Army (SNA) was reconstituted in the mid-2000s and has been fighting al-Shabaab ever since.² The SNA has waged this war with considerable assistance from international partners, most notably an African Union (A.U.) enforcement operation, the United States, and since 2013, the United Nations (U.N.), which has delivered non-lethal logistical support.³

In mid-2022, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) built upon a wave of clan-based resistance to al-Shabaab and launched a major offensive campaign in the Hiraan and Galmudug regions. By April 2023, the campaign succeeded in recovering over 200 settlements.³ However, the FGS could not consistently implement its stabilization policies and al-Shabaab forces regrouped and counterattacked during 2023.⁴ Today, the war is stalemated once again, as it has been for most of the last eight years.⁵

One factor that might shift the battlefield balance is the planned withdrawal of the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) without first securing a peace deal between the FGS and al-Shabaab. Initially deployed in 2007 and reaching a peak of over 22,000 personnel after 2014, the A.U. force has gradually withdrawn its troops since December 2017 as part of the planned transition to Somali forces assuming responsibility for the country's security.⁶ As

a The SNA has also received training and equipment from the European Union, the United Kingdom, Turkey, the UAE, Qatar, Ethiopia, Uganda, Eritrea, and Egypt.

of April 2024, ATMIS comprises approximately 14,000 troops and 850 police. Another 4,000 A.U. troops should exit by June 30 with the remainder of the force scheduled to leave Somalia by the end of 2024. In addition, the departure of the A.U. force could also mean the end of the United Nations Support Office for Somalia (UNSOS), which currently delivers logistical support to nearly 19,000 SNA soldiers.^{7b}

Considering this exit plan, this article addresses whether the departure of ATMIS would leave the SNA or al-Shabaab stronger militarily. This question is especially pertinent given the specter of an Afghanistan scenario in which the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces rapidly collapsed after the withdrawal of U.S. troops in the summer of 2021.

In Somalia, the ATMIS exit raises legitimate security concerns, but a similarly rapid and complete collapse of the SNA and total victory for al-Shabaab is unlikely. Not only would the SNA retain significant external security assistance from the United States, Turkey, the European Union, UAE, Qatar, the United Kingdom, and other countries, but ATMIS' departure would undermine a key element of al-Shabaab propaganda. Moreover, the SNA already endured the partial withdrawal of a key security partner when the Trump administration removed most of the roughly 700 U.S. troops from Somalia in December 2020. The impact on the SNA was not positive but nor was it catastrophic: The United States retained its logistical, training, and mentorship support packages, and many of the withdrawn troops continued "commuting to work"⁸ from the wider region and Europe. In May 2022, the Biden administration redeployed some 450 U.S. soldiers to Somalia.⁹ The issue at hand is whether the departure of ATMIS could be more consequential.

To answer this question, this article analyzes the principal sources of strength for both the SNA and al-Shabaab, basing a net assessment on seven factors identified by Jonathan Schroden to

b This non-lethal support to the SNA is paid for by voluntary contributions to a U.N. trust fund. See "Somali Security Forces (SSF) Trust Fund," United Nations Office in Somalia, n.d.

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“The ATMIS exit would likely strengthen al-Shabaab’s morale, boost its psychological operations, increase its fighters’ freedom of movement and action across larger parts of south-central Somalia, enable it to more frequently target the SNA, and could remove some important counter-IED capabilities that the SNA is lacking.”

compare the strength of Afghan forces and the Taliban before and after the United States pulled its troops out of Afghanistan.¹⁰ These factors are size, material resources (i.e., money and technology), external support, force employment, cohesion (i.e., staying power and battlefield performance), psychological operations, and morale. While the first four address material factors, the latter three emphasize non-material factors, including the will to fight.

Overall, this net assessment suggests that in the event of an ATMIS exit by December 31, 2024, the SNA would retain only a *conventional* military advantage over al-Shabaab, but this would be insufficient to defeat the militants and would not reduce their ability to wage an effective campaign of destabilization. In fact, the ATMIS exit would likely strengthen al-Shabaab’s morale, boost its psychological operations, increase its fighters’ freedom of movement and action across larger parts of south-central Somalia, enable it to more frequently target the SNA, and could remove some important counter-IED capabilities that the SNA is lacking.

This article now examines each of the seven factors for both sides, then conducts a net assessment of those factors, before providing an answer to the central question and summarizing the major policy implications.

The Seven Factors

Size

SNA

Although the SNA has suffered a huge toll of casualties in its war against al-Shabaab, it has continued to regenerate and grow the size of its trained forces over time. On paper, the SNA has increased from less than 7,000 troops in 2009 to around 32,000 personnel, though unofficial government estimates suggest the deployable force is closer to 19,000.¹¹ ^c In January 2023, Somalia’s National Security Advisor said his government would have an additional 24,000 troops trained and fully equipped by 2024, mainly funded by the UAE and Qatar.¹² There are some risks involved in recruiting and attempting to train such large numbers of troops so quickly. And

there is already considerable variation in the quality of SNA units, with some derived from earlier clan-based formations. The most elite units are the roughly 2,000-strong Danab brigade, trained and equipped by the United States, and the roughly 6,000-strong Turkish-trained and equipped Gorgor battalions.^d The United Nations has accused the SNA of recruiting 121 children between 2019 and 2022.¹³

Al-Shabaab

Considerable uncertainty pervades estimates of al-Shabaab’s strength. In 2008, the African Union estimated al-Shabaab’s operational force at around 2,000; by 2011, the figure was 9,500; and by 2022, it was between 4,000-7,000 fighters, concentrated in central and southern Somalia.¹⁴ The FGS claims it has inflicted hundreds of casualties on al-Shabaab during the offensive campaign since mid-2022. And yet, the most recent UN Monitoring Group report published in January 2024 put the number of al-Shabaab fighters at between 7,000 and 12,000.¹⁵ This reflects al-Shabaab’s ability to withstand significant casualties and recruit new fighters, including children. Al-Shabaab has often forced clan elders and parents to provide children or face reprisal. The United Nations put the number at about 900 with an additional 663 abducted during 2022 alone.¹⁶ Most recently, al-Shabaab “launched a massive recruitment campaign” drawing on Somali anger at the memorandum of understanding (MOU) concluded between Ethiopia and Somaliland on January 1, 2024.¹⁷ This MOU reportedly included Ethiopia’s willingness to recognize Somaliland’s independence in exchange for a 50-year lease of 20 kilometers of Somaliland’s coastline. Al-Shabaab publicly rejected the agreement and called on Somalis to join them to stop Ethiopian interference.

Material Resources

SNA

Since 2017, Somalia’s domestic revenue collection has increased considerably, albeit from a low baseline. This has enabled the payment of salaries for government and federal security service personnel. Since 2021, the SNA’s budget has increased significantly (see Table 1). In 2024, defense spending represented nearly 25 percent of the overall federal budget of U.S. \$1.1 billion.¹⁸ However, since two-thirds of this budget continues to come from external donors, there is a major question-mark over the SNA’s financial sustainability. For context, the FGS’ annual budget has remained heavily reliant on external donors for at least the last five years. In the 2020 annual budget, 50 percent came from external donors; the figure was 61 percent in 2021, 73 percent in 2022, and 70 percent in 2023.¹⁹ In addition to major security assistance programs from the United States, Turkey, UAE, and the European Union, the SNA also receives non-lethal logistical support via a U.N.-administered voluntary trust fund. This has mainly been funded by the United Kingdom, but as of January 2024, it contained only U.S. \$6.3 million, sufficient to support SNA operations for just four months.²⁰ In April, the United Kingdom deposited an additional £2.75 million, bringing its contributions to the trust fund to over

^c Officially, the SNA is supported by 40,000 federal police and several thousand intelligence personnel in the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). Somali Dialogue Platform, *The Shaping of the Somali National Security Architecture* (Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, March 2024), p.11.

^d By late 2022, Turkey had also trained around 300 officers and 400 NCOs. Harun Maruf, “Somalia Military Rebuilding Shows Signs of Improvement,” *Voice of America*, November 30, 2022.



Somalia security officers patrol near the SYL Hotel that was attacked by al-Shabaab on March 14, 2024, in Mogadishu, Somalia. (Farah Abdi Warsameh/AP Photo)

£20 million since 2022.²¹

Table 1: Somalia Defense and Security Budget (U.S. \$ million)²²

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total Defense and Security Budget	163.8	171	195	255.6
<i>Total disbursed by Ministry of Defense</i>	<i>95.7</i>	<i>99.8</i>	<i>117.2</i>	<i>178.1</i>
Armed Forces	93	96.1	110.2	170.5
<i>Total disbursed by Ministry of National Security</i>	<i>68.1</i>	<i>71.15</i>	<i>77.4</i>	<i>77.5</i>
Police	44.1	45	46.4	46.7
National Security Force (NISA)	17.5	18.8	23.9	23.7

The SNA is a relatively low-tech army consisting of small battalions of about 400 soldiers with limited vehicles, few armored vehicles, and mainly small arms and light weapons because of a longstanding international arms embargo. There is no functional Somali air force or navy to speak of, although the United Nations and ATMIS provide air support to the SNA, and the United States

(since 2011) and Turkey (since late 2022) have conducted drone strikes against al-Shabaab.²³ Lack of its own aviation capabilities has considerable implications for SNA's ability to detect threats but also hinders its ability to project power and pursue retreating enemies effectively.²⁴

SNA units are equipped in a highly unequal fashion. FGS officials acknowledge that only part of the SNA is mobile, while some units are largely stationary, only able to operate in very localized areas. It is only the roughly 8,000 Danab and Gorgor forces that constitute the so-called “freedom units/maneuver units”—“those that possess the necessary vehicles to move from point A to point B in order to conduct operations including long-range patrolling and special operation raids.”²⁵ Even the SNA's mobile units lack sufficient armored transport, with most operating soft-skin vehicles, often without explosive ordnance disposal teams. This negatively affects morale and has led to higher numbers of IED-related casualties among the SNA than its A.U. counterparts.²⁶

Al-Shabaab

Considerable uncertainty surrounds al-Shabaab's annual revenue, but estimates suggest it is roughly U.S. \$100 million.²⁷ Al-Shabaab extorts revenue from mafia-style illicit taxation in Mogadishu and southern Somalia; *Isbaaro* or illegitimate roadblocks;²⁸ as well as the illicit trade in charcoal, cows, sugar, and other commodities.²⁹ It also imposes *zakat*—an Islamic tax on savings to be donated to the Muslim poor and needy—on populations under its control.

Al-Shabaab's arsenal includes AK47, PKM, Dushka, B10, grenades, and RPGs, while its heavy weapons include ZU 23/24

and mortars, particularly 60mm and 81mm and reportedly a limited number of 120mm.³⁰ Significant arms and ammunition are thought to come from Yemen, especially via the *Mukalla* network of arms smugglers.³¹ But al-Shabaab has also captured significant military materiel from A.U. and Somali forces. Overrunning A.U. and Somali forward operating bases has enabled al-Shabaab to restock weapons and ammunition. In May 2023, for example, al-Shabaab fighters looted considerable amounts of military materiel from the ATMIS base at Buulo Mareer, including 107mm rockets. Some of these were destroyed by international forces in airstrikes, but al-Shabaab may have subsequently used some of those 107mm rockets to attack the U.N. camp in Aden Adde International Airport (June 25, 2023) and Villa Somalia (July 4, 2023).³²

Al-Shabaab's weapon of choice remains IEDs, which it can manufacture domestically. They are, by far, the leading cause of SNA casualties. Al-Shabaab has used vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) to deadly effect against A.U. and Somali forward operating bases, as well as in other large-scale suicide attacks, mainly in Mogadishu.³³ The militants also operate a limited number of commercial drones that thus far have been used for surveillance and propaganda purposes.

External Support

SNA

The SNA has a wide range of external security partners, on whom it relies heavily. The SNA has worked in parallel and sometimes conducted joint operations with A.U. forces for over 15 years. ATMIS troops have provided artillery and tank fire, as well as counter-IED operations in support of the recent Somali offensive. ATMIS has also conducted resupply operations and delivered medical support, including casualty evacuations and use of its field hospitals. Nevertheless, problems related to coordination, intelligence-sharing, and command and control persist, with some ATMIS contingents raising concerns about the appropriate security clearances of SNA personnel.³⁴ As noted above, the United Nations is now authorized to deliver non-lethal logistical support for up to 18,900 SNA personnel engaged in joint or coordinated operations with ATMIS. U.S. security assistance since 2012 has focused on building the Danab brigade but also provided vehicles and materiel, while Turkey has trained and equipped the Gorgor battalions. Unlike Turkey, the United States regularly retrain Danab units and provides field mentoring and advising. Since it was established in 2010, the European Union Training Mission has trained about 7,000 SNA troops.³⁵ Between 2019 and 2023, Eritrea trained about 5,000 Somali recruits.³⁶ And in January 2023, Somalia's National Security Advisor claimed his government had sent 12,000 recruits to Eritrea, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Uganda, funded in part by monies from the UAE.³⁷ It remains too early to say how these new recruits will perform in battle, but those trained in Eritrea have suffered significant casualties against al-Shabaab with one Somali official estimating desertions as high as 25 percent.³⁸

Al-Shabaab

In direct contrast, al-Shabaab has very few external partners but has a sustainable, diversified funding model to support its fighters. Their principal sources of strength are domestic, rooted in attempts to strengthen the movement's nationalist credentials. While historically al-Shabaab benefitted from significant support in

the Somali diaspora, this has dwindled in response to its persistent use of terror tactics, which have killed thousands of civilians. Al-Shabaab has benefitted from limited amounts of al-Qa`ida expertise and finance, but it enjoys a large degree of operational autonomy and does not rely on much external support beyond some inflows of arms and ammunition noted above.

Force Employment

SNA

The SNA's force employment is part of the Federal Government's three-front war against al-Shabaab, encompassing military, economic, and ideological dimensions. The SNA's strategy has been to work with A.U. forces to hold the major urban areas, secure the main supply routes, and extend stability through a network of dozens of operating bases, with air support from the United States, African Union, United Nations, and Turkey. This was based on a broader "clear-hold-build" approach inspired by the innovation of U.S. military doctrine in the mid-2000s during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The SNA and its partners made some headway on "clearing"—mainly via the Danab troops operating as the SNA's strike force. They were key in what Stig Hansen called "search and destroy" operations against al-Shabaab.³⁹ But the SNA has lacked effective holding forces and hence has struggled with the "hold and build" elements.⁴⁰ In parallel with offensive operations, during 2023 the SNA took over 14 operating bases as ATMIS troops vacated them. It remains to be seen whether occupying these bases will be a boon or hindrance to the SNA, since it may leave the Somali troops vulnerable to al-Shabaab mass attacks while deriving little strategic benefit.⁴¹

Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab is broadly following a strategy of attrition against the SNA and plans to outlast the foreign interventions propping up the FGS.^e To do so, it has waged a prolonged war of destabilization, unencumbered by the many pressures of governing a weak and divided state. Nevertheless, for local populations under its control, al-Shabaab plans to provide them with a degree of stable governance and justice. Here, its principal strategy is intimidation—convincing the population to follow its orders or else it will punish any disobedience, and demonstrating that the government is too weak to stop the group.⁴²

Al-Shabaab's key strongholds are in central (Hiraan and Galagudud) and southern Somalia (around Jilib, Saakow, and Buale), but its forces are spread across the country, including as far north as the mountains of Galgala, Puntland. They have focused on ensuring freedom of movement and action across large swathes of the countryside, in the lush areas of the Jubba and Shabelle rivers, and along key commercial routes. In these areas, al-Shabaab has put considerable effort into providing extrajudicial mechanisms that exploit gaps in the Somali formal justice system to resolve communal and legal disputes as well as punish crimes. The militants have presided over a harsh order, yet some local populations prefer

e Al-Shabaab has also followed this strategy for its operations in Kenya. Mohammed Ibrahim Shire, "Provocation and Attrition Strategies in Transnational Terrorism: The Case of Al-Shabaab," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35:4 (2023): pp. 945-970.

it to the anarchy of warlordism and view it as less corrupt than the official justice system available from the FGS.⁴³ Outside Somalia, the militants have conducted numerous attacks in Kenya, sporadic attacks elsewhere in east Africa, and even briefly invaded Ethiopia in late July 2022.⁴⁴ These actions demonstrate al-Shabaab's belief that it has sufficient resources to execute attacks and campaigns outside of Somalia.

Al-Shabaab generally avoids direct combat with Somali and A.U. forces, preferring asymmetrical warfare tactics. It favors small-scale raids, ambushes (especially along important transit and supply routes, notably from Mogadishu to Baidoa), assassinations, as well as IEDs, frequently emplaced along roadways. There have also been larger-scale assaults on SNA bases (e.g., at Gerilley following the handover from ATMIS to SNA forces).⁴⁵ Al-Shabaab also frequently employs urban area isolation by implementing strict access control measures on roads leading to urban centers. Overall, for the last few years, al-Shabaab has targeted Somali security forces in 42 percent of its attacks, similar to the proportion targeting A.U. forces.⁴⁶ The vast majority of these attacks have been in and around the capital Mogadishu, along the major roadways connecting Mogadishu to Baidoa and Beledweyne, as well as north of Kismayo. In Mogadishu, al-Shabaab has favored VBIEDs, suicide commando attacks, and assassinations.

Cohesion

SNA

The SNA is comprised of a very fragmented set of units, some of which remain heavily clan-based and many of which have experienced different training regimes and operate different types of equipment. Since its reconstitution, the SNA has suffered from desertion, defections, soldiers working multiple jobs, and infiltration by al-Shabaab, although these problems have become less acute.^f Somalia's political leaders have also sometimes tried to politicize the SNA. Under President Farmaajo, for example, SNA units were deployed to coerce domestic political opponents, not just al-Shabaab.⁴⁷ And in April 2021, the political impasse over the contested presidential electoral process resulted in fighting between FGS and opposition-aligned forces, which dragged in elements of the SNA.⁴⁸ The most cohesive units are the Presidential Guard and the Danab, which have benefitted from consistent payments and good equipment, with the latter also having frontline mentors and advisors, helping their operational performance.⁴⁹ During the recent offensive campaign, Danab personnel embedded with other SNA units to help forge a more coherent command and control structure to improve situational awareness.⁵⁰

On the battlefield, the SNA has enjoyed conventional superiority with support from its external partners. The SNA's elite units have conducted many successful strikes against al-Shabaab, but the Somali army has struggled to consistently hold recovered settlements, deliver stabilization programs, and protect populations from al-Shabaab intimidation. It has also often been caught out while defending recovered settlements and some forward operating

bases.^g

Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab's cohesion and endurance stems from a mix of its nationalist credentials, coercion, and intimidation. Al-Shabaab maintains legitimacy with populations who see the group's members as Somali nationalists fighting foreign invaders and a corrupt, ineffective FGS that is dependent on those same foreigners. The militants have demonstrated resilience over nearly two decades, despite facing multiple enemies. Nevertheless, al-Shabaab's leadership recognizes its relative weakness in conventional combat. It has therefore forged cohesive units to employ guerrilla tactics and which usually fight only on their preferred terms. This has included a mandatory training program for all al-Shabaab recruits (children and adults) in which they are indoctrinated and assessed for their suitability. There follows three to six months of basic military training, including physical training, obstacle breaching, religious education, tactics, intelligence collection, weapon handling, and IED construction.⁵¹

On the battlefield, al-Shabaab excels in ambush and overrunning small SNA bases. They have inflicted most SNA casualties using IED attacks and have also launched many deadly small-scale suicide raids. But al-Shabaab has also faced problems. These include suffering large numbers of casualties, including several senior figures, as well as persistent defections, including a mix of rank-and-file and quite senior fighters.⁵² The group has also previously suffered from violent struggles over its leadership and direction.⁵³ However, after the purge of its leadership in late 2013, al-Shabaab has broadly consolidated its approach, now under Ahmed Diriye's leadership. But al-Shabaab's harsh rule has also inspired some local communities to engage in armed resistance, including in Hiraan region in 2022, which catalyzed the subsequent FGS offensive campaign.⁵⁴

Psychological Operations

SNA

The FGS has generally struggled with psychological operations. Its wartime communications tend to emphasize (and often exaggerate) the number of al-Shabaab casualties and the amount of territory its forces have "recovered" or "liberated" as key metrics. This has often been undermined by failure to hold onto numerous "recovered" settlements. The Federal Government has also tended to be reactive, responding to al-Shabaab's narratives and hence prioritizing content moderation, counter-narratives, and even banning certain platforms, including TikTok and Telegram in 2023.⁵⁵ Yet al-Shabaab's propaganda persists. More proactively, successive Somali federal administrations have offered amnesty to al-Shabaab fighters who leave and denounce the organization.⁵⁶ And in late 2022, the Federal Government tried to undermine al-Shabaab's ideological appeal by instructing media outlets to refer to the group as Khawarij (or deviants from Islam).⁵⁷ But this was not consistently implemented and was criticized by some journalists. In early 2023, the FGS received a significant boost when 300 Somali clerics pledged to publicly denounce al-Shabaab's interpretation

f However, recent reports suggest a significant desertion rate has affected the Eritrean-trained SNA troops. "Trained Somali forces desert after PM's support for Hamas," Horn Observer, November 19, 2023.

g For example, in Galcad. See "Somalia's al Shabaab attacks base in town it had lost, kills seven," Reuters, January 20, 2023.

of Islam.⁵⁸

Al-Shabaab

In contrast, al-Shabaab has cultivated a sophisticated and rather effective PSYOPS infrastructure geared to establishing its version of an Islamic state in Somalia. Its leaders have retained centralized control over its major strategic narratives, disseminated in multiple languages via Al-Kataib Media Foundation, radio stations, online news sources, and social media and messaging apps.⁵⁹ Al-Shabaab PSYOPS emphasize their inevitable victory over the “apostate” Federal Government and foreigners (usually portrayed as Christians); their ability to infiltrate government institutions and assassinate officials; and the invincibility of their forces, although it is notable that al-Shabaab frequently lies about their casualty figures and will often bury their dead in mass graves without burial markers.⁶⁰ Unsurprisingly, it regularly rejects peace negotiations with the Federal Government, depicting talks as a sign of weakness. Al-Shabaab also portrays itself as transcending clan affiliations but goes to considerable lengths to win support from key clans.⁶¹ A recent assessment concluded that al-Shabaab “understands its adversaries better than its adversaries understand al-Shabaab. It accurately identifies and highlights its enemies’ weaknesses, then it effectively communicates those deficits in ways that resonate with Somalis’ existing understandings and perceptions.”⁶²

Morale

SNA

The SNA suffered a long period of very low morale after its reconstitution. This stemmed from a plethora of major challenges, including lack of consistent salary payments and supporting infrastructure, poor equipment, poor leadership, poor management systems, and very high levels of corruption. The SNA was also regularly infiltrated by al-Shabaab operatives, undermining its internal workings and its ability to collaborate with international partners. Although the situation is generally much better than a decade ago, a March 2024 report suggested that during the recent offensive campaign over 1,300 of the Turkish-trained Gorgor troops had deserted their units while several hundred had been killed, including several battalion commanders.⁶³ It is difficult to judge how the ATMIS withdrawal is affecting morale throughout the SNA: While it undermines a major tenet of al-Shabaab propaganda, it significantly reduces the military capabilities available to support the SNA, and an A.U. withdrawal, similar to the Afghanistan case, could lead to other complementary or cascading impacts.

On the positive side, the long-delayed implementation of biometric ID and electronic payment systems has made it harder to steal soldiers’ salaries and has significantly reduced the problem of “ghost soldiers” on the SNA’s payroll. The SNA’s growing numbers and financial resources have also helped. The growth of the Danab brigade has attracted recruits from across the country and symbolizes the benefits of building an explicitly multiclan national army. The recent deal for the United States to build five new military bases across south-central Somalia should also improve morale.⁶⁴ So too has the U.N. Security Council’s December 2023 decision to lift the embargo on arms supplies to the FGS.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, it is telling that over the last two years, multiple senior political leaders and military officials have felt the need to make more frequent visits to the ‘frontlines’ partly to boost morale. This includes President

Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who has regularly visited the frontlines since the start of the 2022 offensive campaign.⁶⁶

Al-Shabaab

It is generally believed that al-Shabaab’s mid-level and senior members have sustained high morale for years. They generally “believe that they have a better life and security than do [Somali] government officials.”⁶⁷ One analysis noted the “sense of smugness and self-satisfaction” among al-Shabaab leadership as well as a broad sense of self-righteousness.⁶⁸ The militants’ resilience in the face of multiple enemies is very important: They are still here, recruiting fighters, financing their war, and achieving regular tactical victories. This is bolstered by a widespread faith that time is on their side and that foreigners will eventually tire and leave Somalia. Such views were strengthened by the 2020 U.S. troop withdrawal and the official adoption of a timetable for ATMIS’ exit. When problems have arisen, al-Shabaab turns to da’wa (preaching) officers to raise spirits among its fighters, including by selling the “merits of martyrdom.”⁶⁹

On the other hand, several factors have resulted in numerous desertions and defections. The increased tempo of airstrikes targeting rank-and-file al-Shabaab forces during the Trump administration (2017-2020) reportedly spread significant fear and concerns about how it reduced the militants’ freedom of movement and ability to muster for large attacks.⁷⁰ Al-Shabaab has also lost significant support among the Somali diaspora over the last decade; it is facing a larger and increasingly well-trained and equipped SNA, and it has sustained many hundreds of casualties over the last two years in particular.

Net Assessment

Considering this discussion of the size, material resources, external support, force employment, cohesion, psychological operations, and morale for both the SNA and al-Shabaab, how should one assess those factors in the projected absence of ATMIS forces?

Size

The SNA is probably over twice the size of al-Shabaab, and if the current recruiting plan succeeds, it would be well over three times as large. However, measuring each side’s mobile forces reveals much greater parity. Moreover, while al-Shabaab’s true strength remains unknown, the militants have consistently replenished their losses through forcible recruitment and cutting deals with clans. ***Assessment: Significant SNA advantage, but rough parity of mobile forces.***

Material Resources

Al-Shabaab has a much leaner and less technically sophisticated fighting force than the SNA, and as such, it is cheaper to maintain. The militants also maintain diverse revenues streams despite attempts to stop them.⁷¹ The SNA’s greater numbers, administrative, and support elements require more funding, currently more than the FGS can afford alone. It is an open question how long Somalia’s external partners will continue to pay for security assistance programs for the SNA. The U.N.-delivered logistical support package for up to 18,900 SNA personnel will be particularly important to maintain. ***Assessment: Finance: Significant SNA advantage in absolute terms, but it is dependent on external partners. Significant al-Shabaab advantage in terms of***

sustainability. Technical Capability: SNA slight and growing advantage.

External Support

Even without ATMIS, the SNA will retain considerable security assistance from about 10 external partners. This is a significant advantage, including for training, equipping, and advising. But it can also create unhelpful dependencies, add to incohesion, and generate coordination and capacity challenges for the FGS. Al-Shabaab, in contrast, is primarily a home-grown movement and is not dependent on external partnerships, receiving limited funding and technical expertise from al-Qa`ida. **Assessment: Significant SNA advantage, but unlike the SNA, al-Shabaab has few external dependencies.**

Morale Force Employment

Although al-Shabaab lost considerable territory between 2011 and 2014, since then, neither side has managed to decisively break the strategic stalemate. Outright military victory is highly unlikely for the foreseeable future. Moreover, al-Shabaab benefits from the current configuration of forces: It is cheaper to maintain its *modus operandi* than the SNA; its ability to sustain its war of destabilization is a propaganda victory of sorts; and the SNA are spread over many forward operating bases. The withdrawal of ATMIS would take further pressure off al-Shabaab, enabling them to focus a much higher proportion of their attacks on the SNA. **Assessment: Significant al-Shabaab advantage.**

Cohesion

The SNA remains a fragmented force for two principal reasons. First, Somalia's bickering political leaders have failed to implement a coherent national security architecture that clarifies force structures and the relationship between the FGS and the country's federal member states. Second, it is an army built by multiple security partners who have used different doctrine, techniques, and equipment. In sum, no amount of professionalism by individual SNA soldiers could overcome such top-down political fragmentation. In practice, Danab forces remain the key to ensuring greater cohesion among the wider SNA, but there is consequently a danger of them being overused, including for tasks other than their intended purpose. In comparison, al-Shabaab's fighting force is more cohesive, despite some clan-related tensions. **Assessment: Significant al-Shabaab advantage, but the SNA is improving.**

Psychological Operations

Al-Shabaab continues to disseminate its strategic messages regarding endurance, inevitability, and invincibility via a range of platforms and mediums. Those themes continue to resonate with a variety of local audiences in Somalia. In comparison, the FGS has been reactive and overly fixated on incomplete metrics such as casualty counts and "recovered" territory while struggling to undermine al-Shabaab's legitimacy. **Assessment: Significant al-Shabaab advantage.**

Morale

Overall, al-Shabaab's leadership and much of the rank-and-file appear to have maintained consistently higher levels of confidence than most of the SNA. Al-Shabaab's superior morale stems from the beliefs that the group can withstand SNA offensives and exploit

SNA weaknesses more effectively than *vice versa*. In comparison, the SNA's morale has deflated after the initial progress of the 2022 offensive. Moreover, the recent positive news about lifting the U.N. arms embargo, increasing funds, and fresh recruits is largely offset by concerns that its international partners are growing weary. **Assessment: Slight al-Shabaab advantage.**

Table 2 summarizes the comparative discussion of each factor and presents a net assessment of each. As the last row indicates, the net assessment of these factors tilts to the advantage of al-Shabaab.

Table 2: A net assessment of the SNA and al-Shabaab's military strength in the projected absence of ATMIS forces

Factor	Advantage	Comments
Size	Significant SNA, but rough parity of mobile forces.	The SNA has twice the numbers of al-Shabaab, but many of its units are not mobile and its newest recruits are not battle-hardened.
Material Resources	Finance: Significant SNA in absolute terms; but significant al-Shabaab advantage in terms of sustainability. Technical Capability: Slightly SNA.	The SNA has access to more funding, but al-Shabaab's fighting force is more financially sustainable. The SNA has access to better military technology than al-Shabaab.
External Support	Significant SNA, but al-Shabaab is less reliant on external partners.	The SNA benefits from a variety of external security partners but remains dependent on them, whereas al-Shabaab is largely self-sufficient.
Force Employment	Slightly al-Shabaab.	Al-Shabaab has proved resilient in the countryside and its key strongholds, and adept at eroding government control. It plans to outlast Somalia's external partners while waging a war of destabilization and intimidation. SNA partner air superiority and better special forces are mitigating factors.

Cohesion	Significant al-Shabaab, but SNA improving.	Al-Shabaab is a more cohesive organization than the SNA.
PSYOPS	Significant al-Shabaab.	Al-Shabaab consistently conducts more effective psychological operations.
Morale	Slightly al-Shabaab.	Al-Shabaab believes foreign forces are tiring of their deployment in Somalia and they are better able to exploit the SNA's weaknesses than <i>vice versa</i> .
Net Assessment	Slightly al-Shabaab.	While smaller and less technologically sophisticated, al-Shabaab's fighting forces are more cohesive, financially sustainable, employ sustainable technologies and effective PSYOPS, and have generally higher morale owing to their demonstrated resilience.

Although the SNA has significant advantages across the main material dimensions of this assessment (size, finance, technology, and external support), it remains heavily reliant on external support and is weaker across the non-material dimensions. In contrast, al-Shabaab's main advantages stem from the sustainability of its forces and operations, and its performance across the non-material dimensions of this assessment related to force employment, cohesion, psychological operations, and morale. This finding has several implications for how to tilt the military balance in Somalia in the Federal Government's favor.

First, given how important non-material factors were in the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, this assessment should serve as a stark warning that reforms are needed.⁷² The FGS should focus on improving the central non-material issues related to force employment, cohesion, PSYOPS and morale.

Second, without ATMIS, the SNA should prepare to face several hundred additional attacks each year. Since A.U. peacekeepers were the targets of nearly half of al-Shabaab attacks over the last few years,⁷³ the militants will subsequently be able to focus almost entirely on the SNA. Many attacks will use IEDs, and hence, the SNA should prioritize improving its counter-IED capabilities.

Finally, although the SNA's material advantages over al-Shabaab are important, they have depended on external support that is no longer guaranteed. After ATMIS, the SNA will become even more reliant on its other external partners, especially the United States and Turkey. Given the Trump administration's decision to withdraw its troops in 2020, the 2024 U.S. presidential election result could be a key factor in the war against al-Shabaab. The policy challenge for Somalia's remaining external partners is therefore to provide useful assistance to the SNA without creating military dependency of the type witnessed in Afghanistan. For the FGS, three additional imperatives stand out. First, to ensure the financial sustainability of its armed forces. Second, to improve their cohesion. This requires agreement among Somalia's political elites on operationalizing the new national security architecture and not politicizing the security services, as well as creating more cohesion by standardizing equipment and systems across the SNA. Third, the FGS must ensure that the SNA continues to receive the non-lethal logistical support currently delivered by UN Support Office for Somalia and financed via the U.N. trust fund. **CTC**

Conclusion and Implications

This article has analyzed whether the departure of ATMIS would leave the SNA or al-Shabaab stronger militarily. Having conducted a net assessment across seven factors, the author's conclusion is that al-Shabaab would enjoy a slight military advantage overall.

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