

Between Gaza and Sana'a

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SPECIAL REPORT

Between Gaza and Sana'a

Dr. (Col. Res.) Shaul Shay

Abstract

The Houthis in Yemen consider both US and Israel as enemies and the slogan of the Houthi movement is "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam." The leader of Yemen's Houthi rebels has repeatedly warned that his group will join wars of Hezbollah and Palestinian resistance groups against Israel.

The Iran backed Houthis in Yemen joined the war against Israel and has opened a new front and since October 19, 2023 the Houthis have launched three times missiles and drones towards the Southern part of Israel.

On October 19, 2023, the Houthis fired cruise missiles and drones in a northerly direction—toward Israel—that the USS Carney and Saudi air defense intercepted.¹ On October 22, 2023, the Houthi militia claimed responsibility for the missiles and drones launched towards Israel.

On October 27, 2023, blasts hit Nuweiba and Taba in Egypt's South Sinai. The Houthis have not officially commented on the incident, but the two drones are likely to be those of the Houthis, in what is considered the group's second failed attack on Israel in less than two weeks.²

Egypt's army spokesperson, Gharib Abdel-Hafez, said in a statement that according to the investigations conducted by a specialized committee, "Two drones were coming from south of Red Sea to the north." One of the drones was targeted outside Egypt's airspace in the Gulf of Aqaba, resulting in some debris falling in an uninhabited area in Nuweiba, while the second one fell in Taba. Israel's foreign ministry said that missiles and drones that hit Egypt on October 27, 2023, were launched by the Houthi movement at Israel.³

On October 31, 2023, IDF said that the Arrow air defense system intercepted a surface-to-surface ballistic missile launched from the "Red Sea area" at Israel. It was first operational use of the long-range system. The missile was believed to have been launched by the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, aimed for the southernmost city of Eilat.⁴

The Houthi threat against Israel appear to be increasing and with Iran's continued

1 US Navy intercepts 3 missiles fired from Yemen 'potentially' at Israel: Pentagon, Arab news, October 20, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2394376/middle-east>

2 A second failed Houthi attack on Israel, South 24, October 28, 2023. <https://south24.net/news/newse.php?nid=3608>

3 Two drones coming from south of the Red Sea crashed in Taba and Nuweiba: Egypt's army spokesperson, Ahram online, October 27, 2023. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/1237/511111/Egypt/Defence/Two-drones-coming-from-south-of-the-Red-Sea-crashe.aspx>

4 In first, Arrow system used to down missile from 'Red Sea'; Houthis claim UAV attack, The Times of Israel, October 31, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-first-arrow-system-used-to-down-missile-from-red-sea-houthis-claim-uav-attack/>

support for the Houthis the Red Sea could potentially become another area of conflict in Iran's proxy war against Israel. The Taba and Nuweiba explosions highlight the risks facing not only Israel but Egypt and other countries in the region.

Iran's coordination with its regional proxies since Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7 strongly suggests that the proxies are acting as part of an Iranian-organized strategic plan. Iran has denied involvement in planning the attack, but the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised the slaughter in a televised address.

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Houthi Drones and Missiles Attacks on Eilat

On October 31, 2023, IDF said that the Arrow air defense system intercepted a surface-to-surface ballistic missile launched from the "Red Sea area" at Israel. It was first operational use of the long-range system.¹

In a statement, the Israel Defense Forces said that air force systems tracked the missile's trajectory and intercepted it "at the most appropriate operational time and location." The missile was believed to have been launched by the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, aimed for the southernmost city of Eilat.²

Earlier on October 31, 2023, the IDF said fighter jets downed two "hostile targets" — believed to be drones — that were flying in the Red Sea area during the morning. "All the threats were intercepted outside the territory of the State of Israel. No intrusion into Israeli territory was detected," the IDF added.³

Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed to have launched a drone attack towards Israel's southern city of Eilat in 'retaliation' for the war in Gaza. Abdelaziz bin Habtour, prime minister of the Houthi government, said that "These drones belong to the state of Yemen."⁴

The Drone Attacks on South Sinai

Blasts hit Nuweiba and Taba in Egypt's South Sinai on October 27, 2023. There was no claim of responsibility after the blasts. Egypt's army spokesperson, Gharib Abdel-Hafez, said in a statement that according to the investigations conducted by a specialized committee, "Two drones were coming from south of Red Sea to the north." One of the drones was targeted outside Egypt's airspace in the Gulf of Aqaba, resulting in some

1 Ibid.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Yemen's Houthi rebels claim drone launch against southern Israel, Al Jazeera, October 31, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/31/israel-says-it-shot-down-aerial-target-near-red-sea-city-of-eilat>

debris falling in an uninhabited area in Nuweiba, while the second one fell in Taba.⁵

The spokesperson of the Egyptian Armed Forces said that a drone fell near a hospital in Taba. The crashed drone in Taba hit the ambulance building and the residences of hospital management, injured six individuals who were treated and released from the hospital.⁶ Taba is a resort town on the Red Sea that is popular with tourists. It sits just opposite Israel's Red Sea port city of Eilat.

Egypt's army spokesperson also mentioned that the Egyptian Air Force and Air Defense forces are currently intensifying their efforts to secure Egyptian airspace in all strategic directions for the safety of the state.⁷ An official Egyptian source said that Egypt will have "all options on the table" once it knows the origin of the launch and Egypt reserves the right to respond appropriately.⁸

Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi reaffirmed on October 28, 2023, that the Egyptian state is fully capable of protecting the country amid the risk of regional escalation from the war in Gaza. "We are capable of protecting our homeland, and we are making significant efforts to achieve de-escalation." President El-Sisi's remarks came as he addressed the ongoing violence in the Gaza Strip, as well as the recent incidents in Taba and Nuweiba. El-Sisi pointed out that these events are clear indicators of the ripple effects of the escalation in Gaza on the broader region.⁹

Israel's foreign ministry said that missiles and drones that hit Egypt on October 27, 2023, were launched by the Houthi movement at Israel. "Israel condemns the harm caused to Egypt's security forces by the missiles and drones launched by the Houthi terrorist organization with the intention of harming Israel."¹⁰

The Israel Defense Forces on October 27, 2023, said a fighter jet intercepted a "hostile target" over the Red Sea which did not enter Israeli airspace, the IDF also published a video of the interception.¹¹

5 Two drones coming from south of the Red Sea crashed in Taba and Nuweiba: Egypt's army spokesperson, Ahram online, October 27, 2023. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/1237/511111/Egypt/Defence/Two-drones-coming-from-south-of-the-Red-Sea-crashe.aspx>

6 Missile strikes Egyptian Red Sea town of Taba near Israeli border, Al Arabiya, October 27, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/27/Israel-says-it-s-aware-of-security-incident-in-Egypt-near-Sinai-border>

7 Ibid.

8 Egypt is investigating after projectile, drone hit in South Sinai amid Israel's war on Gaza, Ahram online, October 27, 2023. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/1237/511072/Egypt/Defence/Egypt-is-investigating-after-projectile,-drone-hit.aspx>

9 Updated: Sisi affirms Egypt's ability to safeguard its homeland amidst regional challenges, Ahram online, October 28, 2023. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/2/511133/Egypt/Society/UPDATED-Sisi-affirms-Egypt%E2%80%99s-ability-to-safeguard-.aspx>

10 Israel says missiles that hit Egypt were launched by Yemen's Houthis at Israel, Al Arabiya, October 27, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/27/Israel-says-missiles-that-hit-Egypt-were-launched-by-Yemen-s-Houthis-at-Israel>

11 IAF fighter jet intercepts 'aerial threat' over Red Sea, hours after Egypt strike, The Times of Israel, October 27, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-apparent-drone-strike-on-egypt-town-near-israel-launched-from-red-sea-area/>

IDF Spokesperson, Brig. Gen. Daniel Hagari, said on October 27, 2023, that “over the past several hours, an aerial threat in the Red Sea area was identified and fighter jets were scrambled, and the matter is being investigated. To our understanding, this is the origin of the strike in Egypt. Israel will work with Egypt and the U.S. and will bolster regional defenses in the area.”¹²

The Houthis have not officially commented on the incident, but the two drones are likely to be those of the Houthis, in what is considered the group’s second failed attack on Israel in less than two weeks.¹³

On October 25, 2023, Israel said a rocket claimed by Hamas hit an area outlying Eilat, opposite Taba on the Israeli side of the border. Taba lies some 220 kms from Gaza.¹⁴ Hamas said it had targeted Eilat with a missile, which the Israeli military said hit an outlying area. That incident appeared to be the longest-range Palestinian attack of the Gaza war.¹⁵

US Navy Intercepted Missiles and Drones Fired From Yemen

On October 19, 2023, the USS Carney an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, patrolling in the northern Red Sea, shot down three land-attack cruise missiles and several drones launched by the Iran backed Houthi rebels from Yemen heading north along the Red Sea, towards targets in Israel.¹⁶

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported that one of the missiles fired towards Israel by Houthi rebels in Yemen was intercepted by Saudi Arabia. According to the WSJ, the fifth missile was intercepted by Saudi air defense systems, operating to protect Saudi airspace.¹⁷

Saudi Arabia has been engaged in fighting against the rebels through its coalition group in Yemen. Houthi rebels, funded and supported by Iran, have fired hundreds cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and armed drones towards Saudi Arabia over the past few years, following the Houthi rebellion in Yemen. Saudi Arabia has several patriot missile

12 Unidentified Drone Crashes Next to Hospital in Taba, Near Israel-Egypt Border, Haaretz, October 27, 2023. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-27/ty-article/unidentified-drone-crashes-next-to-hospital-in-tab-a-near-israel-egypt-border/0000018b-706b-d22c-a5ff-f36b4f6f0000>

13 A second failed Houthi attack on Israel, South 24, October 28, 2023. <https://south24.net/news/newse.php?nid=3608>

14 Missile strikes Egyptian Red Sea town of Taba near Israeli border, Al Arabiya, October 27, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/27/Israel-says-it-s-aware-of-security-incident-in-Egypt-near-Sinai-border>

15 Missile strikes Egypt’s Taba resort town near Israel border, Al Jazeera, October 27, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/27/missile-strikes-egypts-tab-a-resort-town-near-israel-border>

16 US Navy intercepts 3 missiles fired from Yemen ‘potentially’ at Israel: Pentagon, Arab news, October 20, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2394376/middle-east>

17 Saudi Arabia shoots down Houthi missile from Yemen heading towards Israel, All Arab news, October 26, 2023. <https://allarab.news/saudi-arabia-shoots-down-houthi-missile-from-yemen-heading-towards-israel/>

defense systems which it has acquired from the United States.¹⁸

The Iranian-backed Houthi militia claimed on October 22, 2023, missiles and drones that were launched towards Israel, before being intercepted by the US Navy north of the Red Sea. The head of the Houthis government, Abdulaziz bin Habtour, said: "We launched these missiles as a form of solidarity with the people of Gaza." Bin Habtour claimed that the US Navy failed in intercepting all the missiles and drones and some of it reached its targets. He threatened to target Israeli ships in the Red Sea if Israeli military operations continued in the Palestine's Gaza Strip". Sanaa has contributed and will contribute with all capabilities to respond to the massacre in Gaza," he added.¹⁹

A Houthi newspaper said that Bin Habtour visited Hamas office in Sanaa on October 21, 2023, and that this was the third visit of its kind in two weeks.²⁰

Pentagon spokesperson Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder told reporters: "This action was a demonstration of the integrated air and missile defense architecture that we have built in the Middle East, and that we are prepared to utilize whenever necessary to protect our partners and our interests in this important region."²¹

Israel and the Houthi Threats

Following the War in Gaza, a number Iran's proxy militant groups across the region — from Hezbollah to the Houthis — have expressed support for the Hamas and threatened Israel.²²

Iranian state television has warned about attacks on Israel from multiple fronts on its borders if the ongoing crackdown on terrorist group Hamas in the Gaza strip region by IDF continues. The TV claimed that Houthis in Yemen possessed missiles with a range of more than 1200 miles.²³

On October 7, 2023, the same day that operation Al-Aqsa Flood was launched by Hamas, Muhammad Ali Al Houthi, a member of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, delivered remarks during a march in Sana'a in support of the operation. In his opening remarks, Al-Houthi stated: "We say to all those heroic mujahideen who launched the very

18 Ibid.

19 The Houthis claim missiles and drones launched towards Israel, South24, October 22, 2023. <https://south24.net/news/newse.php?nid=3597>

20 Ibid.

21 US Navy warship shoots down cruise missiles, drones 'potentially' targeting Israel, aa. com. October 20, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/us-navy-warship-shoots-down-cruise-missiles-drones-potentially-targeting-israel/3026576>

22 Rockets fired by Houthis in Yemen meant for Israel; 30 children among Gaza hostages; IDF says hits 800 Gaza targets, ynet, October 19, 2023. <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/syy59o6za>

23 Iranian state TV visualises how 'multiple front attack' on Israel would happen, Hindustan Times, October 19, 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/iranian-state-tv-visualises-how-multiple-front-attack-on-israel-would-happen-101697718741437.html>

great operation of the free peoples: may Allah bless you and move you, your jihad, your victory, and in what you have achieved today in this heroic and honorable operation that rivals the sky in its glory, strength, elevation, morale, and in its men, who believe in Allah and trust in Allah." Al-Houthi further took aim at Israel, hailing operation Al-Aqsa Flood for exposing the state's "weakness." He said: "The Al-Aqsa Flood Operation testifies to the fragility of the enemy, to the weakness of its intelligence, to the weakness of its strength, and to the fact that it represents nothing," Al-Houthi proclaimed, continuing, "we say to that Jew who went to make a Palestinian woman kneel, today we saw your trained soldiers kneel." ²⁴

The leader of Yemen's Houthi movement which calls itself Ansar Allah, Abdel-Malek Al-Houthi, warned on October 10, 2023, that if the US intervenes on the side of Israel in its "war" against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the group will respond by firing drones and missiles, and other military options. He said the group was ready to coordinate intervention with other members of the so-called "Axis of Resistance" which encompasses Iranian-backed Shiite Muslim factions in Iraq and Lebanon's Hezbollah group.²⁵ "We warn America that its direct intervention in the aggression against the Palestinian people means turning it into a regional war." ²⁶

Referring to similar statements put out by other groups in the so-called 'Islamic Resistance,' or group's controlled, supported, or allied to Iran, al-Houthi noted that he is maintaining a "red-line" for this conflict. For instance, this line will be crossed "if the Americans intervene directly and militarily, then we are ready to participate even with missiles and marches." ²⁷

The Houthi leader also called on various international organizations, such as the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, to support the so-called "Islamic Resistance" against Israel, otherwise such organizations are pursuing a "weak position." According to al-Houthi, a "weak position" is akin to "loyalty to the Zionist entity." ²⁸

On October 16, 2023, al-Houthi posted a message to X, blasting Saudi Arabia for not allowing fighters from Yemen to move north to battle alongside Hamas, and for not joining the "resistance" themselves.²⁹

24 Political leader of Ansar Allah Houthi Movement delivers remarks at rally in Sana'a, Yemen, in support of Hamas attack, addresses Israel: 'Today we saw your trained soldiers kneel', MEMRI, October 7, 2023. <https://www.memri.org/reports/political-leader-ansar-allah-houthi-movement-delivers-remarks-rally-sanaa-yemen-support>

25 Iran's proxies in Yemen, Iraq threaten US over support for Israel, Iran international, October 19, 2023. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202310102133>

26 Yemen: Houthis warn US not to intervene in Gaza, Middle East monitor, October 11, 2023. <https://www.middleeast-monitor.com/20231011-yemen-houthis-warn-us-not-to-intervene-in-gaza/>

27 Joe Truzman, Leader of Yemen's Houthis states willingness to support 'Palestinian people', FDD, October 10, 2023. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/10/10/leader-of-yemens-houthis-states-willingness-to-support-palestinian-people/>

28 Ibid.

29 Saudi Arabia shoots down Houthi missile from Yemen heading towards Israel, All Arab news, October 26, 2023. <https://allarab.news/saudi-arabia-shoots-down-houthi-missile-from-yemen-heading-towards-israel/>

The Houthis in Yemen consider both US and Israel as enemies and the slogan of the Houthi movement is “Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam.” The leader of Yemen’s Houthi rebels has repeatedly warned that his group will join wars of Hizballah and Palestinian resistance groups against Israel.

Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi’s political council and a spokesman for the movement, declared on X: “I believe that now is the opportune moment for the axis of resistance, represented by Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq, to participate in the decisive battle against the occupying Zionist entity in support of our Palestinian brothers.”³⁰

The Houthi threat to strike Israel is not a novel development, as they have issued similar warnings in the past. In 2020, a Houthi official said that long-range missiles fired at Saudi Arabian oil facilities could also be used against Israel.³¹

In March 2018, Abdel Malek al-Houthi told the Lebanese newspaper Al Akhbar that “our announcement that we are prepared to send fighters in any Israeli war against Lebanon or Palestine, is based on our principles”. He claimed that Israel is “a true enemy” for every Arab and Muslim country, and if Yemen had borders with Lebanon or Palestine, Houthis would participate in fighting with the Lebanese and Palestinians. “We will not be reluctant to send fighters in a new war. Many of Yemen’s tribesmen are ambitious to fight against Israel, and they are looking for the day to participate along with the freemen of the Islamic nation against the Israeli enemy,” he added.³²

Summary

On October 19, 2023, the Houthis fired cruise missiles and drones in a northerly direction—toward Israel—that the USS Carney and Saudi air defiance intercepted. The interceptions came as military bases hosting US forces in Iraq and Syria endured a spate of drone attacks and Hezbollah has exchanged deadly fire with Israeli forces.

The Houthi threat against Israel appear to be increasing and with Iran’s continued support for the Houthis the Red Sea could potentially become another area of conflict in Iran’s proxy war against Israel. The Taba and Nuweiba explosions highlight the risks facing not only Israel but also Egypt and other countries in the region.

Iran’s coordination with its regional proxies since Hamas’s attack on Israel on October 7 strongly suggests that the proxies are acting as part of an Iranian-organized strategic plan. Iran has denied involvement in planning the attack, but the country’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised the slaughter in a televised address.

30 Israel-Palestine war draws threats from Yemen’s Houthis of regional conflict, Middle East Eye, October 12, 2023. [https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-yemen- Houthis-threats-regional-conflict](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-yemen-Houthis-threats-regional-conflict)

31 Ibid.

32 Houthi leader vows to fight with Hezbollah in future war with Israel, Middle East Eye, March 23, 2018. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/houthi-leader-vows-fight-hezbollah-future-war-israel>

The Iranian state television broadcast featured footage of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who said that if the war continued “nobody could stop the forces of the resistance.” The TV report highlighted how a vicious attack on Israel would unfold from multiple fronts. It highlighted that Houthis in Yemen from the south, Syrian and Iraqi militias in Syria from the east, and Hezbollah in Lebanon from the north would launch coordinated attack on Israel with missiles and drones.

It seems that Iran at this stage is interested in discouraging Israel from carrying out its threat to bring down Hamas and demonstrating to the US that Iran is capable of harming American interests in the Middle East if it supports Israel.

Israel considered that the Houthis’ threats in Yemen were serious and the attacks by the Houthis toward Israel did not surprise the IDF. Israel also estimates that further attacks on Israel can be expected.

Israel has a multi-layer air defense system to defend against missiles and drones launched from Yemen and the IDF is well-coordinated with the U.S. Central Command and Fifth Fleet, preparing for aggression from Yemen.

This time, the missiles and drones launched from Yemen at Israel were intercepted by the American military and the IDF, but this does not mean that the IDF will not respond in the future to any attack by the Houthis. Despite the great distance from Israel, the long arm of the Israeli Air Force and navy can also reach Yemen.³³

The determination that Israel will demonstrate in the war in the Gaza Strip and its success in destroying Hamas infrastructure and the American support for Israel and the level of threat it will pose to Iran and its proxies will determine whether Iran will lead to escalation and a regional war or whether it will allow the war to be limited to Gaza Strip while showing solidarity with Hamas in the other arenas without degenerating into a regional war.

33 Yoni Ben Menachem, The Houthis in Yemen Have Joined the Battle against Israel, Jerusalem center for public affairs, October 19, 2023. The Houthis in Yemen Have Joined the Battle against Israel (jcpa.org)