

The Houthi Advance, Saudi Strategy & the Mecca Defence Pact

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Summary

On 8 September 2026, the Houthis launched a large-scale missile and drone campaign targeting civilian and economic infrastructure in Abha, Khamis Mushait, Jazan and Najran in southern Saudi Arabia. Saudi authorities reported 73 civilian injuries, including among women and children. The Houthis said¹ the KSA had carried out more than 300 air strikes against them over the previous three days. This constituted a direct attack on the Kingdom by an Iranian-backed militia. Maj Gen Al-Maliki said² the Saudi-led Joint Forces Command of the Coalition, which has been fighting the rebels during the civil war in Yemen, *“We will take all necessary operational measures to deter the terrorist Houthi militia with utmost resolve”*.

On 10th Sep, the Houthis captured the Red Sea port city of Makhah (Al-Makha) after a rapid advance on the country’s western coast. They have taken control of the city after days of fierce fighting and the withdrawal of pro-government forces. Before understanding the Houthi takeover of Makhah and its potential regional impact, it is important to look at how they advanced so quickly up the west coast. According to Ahmed Naji,³ a Yemen and Middle East expert at the International Crisis Group;

“The Houthi offensive was not a sudden move, but rather a long-term development. The Houthi military capabilities, especially drones and other weapons, have also increased significantly in recent years. He further said, “to understand the pace of this advance, one must look at the Houthis’ superior military capabilities as well as the weaknesses of the Saudi-backed forces opposing them.”

A map of the Houthis’ battlefield advance helps illustrate the speed of their progress. Before advancing on Makha, the Houthis seized Hays and Al-Khokha. As Hays connects southern Hodeidah to the main routes towards Makha and Bab al-Mandab, its capture opened the way for a further advance down the coast. Houthi forces then reached Makha, compelling pro-government troops to withdraw. After taking the city, they advanced towards the Hanish Islands in the Red Sea, moving closer to the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Iran has sought to prolong a war of attrition by widening the battlefield and deploying its assets gradually as the confrontation evolves. For a time, the Houthis appeared to view Iran’s strategy, striking Israel, U.S. assets and Gulf oil and gas facilities, while blocking the Strait of Hormuz as sufficient. Their media portrayed Iran as capable of winning, giving them little reason to join the fight while Tehran held the advantage. However, the Houthis consistently said they might intervene without an explicit request from Tehran if Iran’s position deteriorated significantly.

1 Houthis seize more key islands in Red Sea, launch attacks into Saudi Arabia | The Times of Israel

2 Houthis launch wave of attacks on Saudi Arabia

3 The Houthis Enter the Middle East War: What Comes Next? | International Crisis Group

Meanwhile, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) reportedly called U.S. President Trump twice this week and asked to intervene and halt Houthi attacks on Saudi territory.

Media reports⁴ say Trump declined, stating that it was not the right time for large-scale strikes against the Houthis, reportedly because of the U.S. midterm elections.

However, the United States continues to provide intelligence, and 200 U.S. military personnel are stationed in the Kingdom to offer non-kinetic support. Although President Trump has said⁵ that *“the war will end after the November mid-term elections, there is no way that the market can believe this claim, as the situation remains perilous.”* His claim may imply that the U.S. could intervene and launch a final military campaign to end the war.

Houthi Military Strength

The Houthis have long worked to strengthen their military and political position since the Saudi-led coalition halted the war while maintaining a complete blockade against them. Iran is the Houthis' main external backer, providing intelligence, military technology, training, weapons and operational assistance in Yemen. Other actors, including Hezbollah, Iran-backed Iraqi militias, Russia and, to some extent, Oman also support efforts to strengthen the group's military capabilities.

Iran Assistance: Iran has provided Houthis with ballistic and cruise missiles, one-way attack drones/UAVs, anti-ship missiles, radar and targeting technology, electronic and technical expertise, military training, intelligence and targeting assistance, financial support, weapons components and manufacturing technology as well as IRGC/Quds Force advisers.

Recent reports indicate⁶ that IRGC commanders advised or directed Houthi operations, including the group's latest offensive along Yemen's Red Sea coast.

Hezbollah Support: Lebanese Hezbollah, itself heavily supported by Iran, has assisted the Houthis with missile and drone expertise, military training, tactical advice, intelligence/operational expertise and communications and battlefield knowledge.

Crucially, Hezbollah is not an independent state sponsor; its support forms part of the broader Iran-led *“Axis of Resistance”* network. The U.S. and other governments have documented⁷ its role in training Houthi personnel.

Iran-backed Iraqi Militias: There is evidence of cooperation between the Houthis and Iran-backed Iraqi armed groups, particularly within the broader Axis of Resistance.

This cooperation reportedly includes technical expertise, missile and drone knowledge, intelligence sharing, operational coordination, training and networking. The UN has documented evidence⁸ of coordination between the Houthis and other Iran-aligned armed groups.

Russian Assistance: Reports describe Russian intelligence and technical cooperation with the Houthis, while a senior expert briefing to the UN Security Council identified Russia as a reported supporter.

4 Donald Trump declines Saudi crown prince's call for US strikes on Houthis | The Jerusalem Post

5 Houthis close in on key strait to threaten deeper oil crisis

6 Iranian arms and advice helped Yemen's Houthis seize key Red Sea city, sources say | Reuters

7 Iran's Support of the Houthis: What to Know | Council on Foreign Relations

8 n2425953.pdf

However, Russia's engagement with the group also reflects diplomatic and maritime interests rather than solely military sponsorship.

Russia is already helping Iran to win a war in order to provide satellite imagery, reconnaissance data, and intelligence concerning U.S. naval deployments and military bases across the Gulf region and also sharing⁹ electronic warfare expertise with Iran. As of 13 September 2026, the Houthis are considerably stronger than they were just weeks ago, largely because of their rapid advance along Yemen's Red Sea coast. However, the ability to threaten or control Bab al-Mandab is distinct from the ability to defeat all opposing forces and hold the strait permanently against a major international military response. They have substantial manpower, strong ground-combat capabilities, thousands of missiles and drones, and extensive experience in guerrilla and irregular warfare.

During their earlier Red Sea campaign, the Houthis demonstrated that they could use ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, one-way attack drones, explosive USVs/boat drones, helicopters and boarding teams. According to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW),¹⁰ *"They even previously hijacked a commercial vessel using a helicopter-borne boarding operation."*

The Houthis do not need a powerful navy to attack shipping or close the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Iran has provided them with sufficient military capabilities to control and disrupt the strait for an extended period. Iran's decades-long asymmetric maritime strategy centers on:

- Anti-ship missiles
- Drones
- Explosive boats
- Naval mines
- Coastal surveillance
- Electronic warfare
- Integrated missile networks

Although the Houthis lack Iran's level of sophistication, Iranian technology, training and expertise have significantly strengthened their capabilities. ISW notes¹¹ that the IRGC- Quds Force has supplied the Houthis with explosive drone boats and other anti-shipping systems.

Houthi Anthropic AI Bot

Media reports suggest that Houthis used Anthropic's AI assistant to develop guided-weapons software, including ballistic missiles. Anthropic's latest and most detailed threat-intelligence report says some actors attempted to misuse its cloud-based AI model for cyberattacks, covert influence operations, surveillance, biological research and weapons development. According to Anthropic,¹² since its previous threat report in November 2025, the company has identified new groups using the model to develop software for firearms, missiles, armed drones, bombs and other munitions, or to improve targeting and control systems.

⁹ The Shadow Allies Behind the Iran-US-Israel War - NoorDahri

¹⁰ Iran Update, September 11, 2026 | ISW

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Subscribe to read (Anthropic says it stopped scientists potentially developing bioweapons with AI- Financial Times)

Anthropic says its threat-intelligence teams investigated and disrupted six such cases over the past year: three linked to China, two to Russia and one to Yemen. The Yemen case involved a group in the north of the country working on guided-rocket and missile programs. According to the report,¹³ the group tried to use the cloud-based model in place of human software engineers to develop guidance, navigation and control software. Although Anthropic's security systems blocked many requests, some actors attempted to evade safeguards by concealing their intentions and splitting their work across multiple sessions.

However, the Anthropic said.¹⁴

"We do not have evidence the actors succeeded in fielding an operational device; but they did test-fire a guided rocket," it said in its report. "This field test appears to have failed: within hours, the actors returned to Claude to work out why it failed."

Houthi Influential Tactics

Understanding the Houthis' political strategy in Yemen requires examining both their ideology and their pragmatic engagement with local communities. The movement emerged from the Zaydi branch of Shia Islam, whose adherents are concentrated mainly in northern Yemen. In Yemen's tribal society, influential Sunni and Shia tribes play major roles in local governance. The Houthis are particularly prominent in the north, where they have established a governing authority that rivals the internationally recognised government. Their approach combines ideological flexibility with political outreach to local communities.

Yemen's tribal system has historically cut across religious and political divisions. Houthis' strategy has therefore never been reducible to a simple contest between: *"Zaydis versus Sunnis."* Instead, they have repeatedly formed alliances across tribal, sectarian and political lines when such partnerships strengthen their position. The Middle East Institute has documented¹⁵ Houthi cooperation with the Southern Movement, civil and secular groups, former president Ali Abdullah Saleh's General People's Congress, and various tribal factions. Yemeni tribes are not a single political bloc.

Longstanding rivalries divide Yemen's major tribal confederations, families and sheikhs, and the Houthis have exploited these divisions effectively. Before taking Sana'a, they capitalised on tensions among Hashid, Bakil and Khawlan, as well as among local sheikhs and supporters of Ali Abdullah Saleh, Islah and Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. The Sana'a Center notes¹⁶ that the Houthis particularly leveraged divisions within Hashid and its rivalry with Bakil to expand their influence.

¹³ Subscribe to read (OpenAI admits AI 'agent' caused major cyber breach by itself – Financial Times)

¹⁴ Subscribe to read (Houthis used Anthropic AI to try to build ballistic missiles – Financial Times)

¹⁵ The Houthi partnership model: Is there a strategy behind the tactics? - Middle East Institute

¹⁶ Northern Yemeni Tribes during the Eras of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi Movement: A Comparative Study - Sana'a Center

Their strategy was straightforward:

“They didn’t initially ask every tribe to accept Houthi ideology. They offered security and political protection.”

This is classic divide-and-co-opt politics. The Houthis also understood a powerful political message:

“We are not the corrupt political establishment.”

During Yemen’s 2011–14 political crisis, weak institutions, economic hardship, corruption, unemployment, rising fuel prices, political infighting, tribal disputes, dissatisfaction with Islah and resentment of the old elite fuelled widespread discontent. The Houthis capitalised on these grievances. When the government removed fuel subsidies in 2014, they organised¹⁷ protests in Sana’a and portrayed themselves as defenders of ordinary Yemenis, attracting supporters beyond their ideological base.

The Houthis initially portrayed themselves as addressing problems facing ordinary tribal communities, including blood feuds, robbery, insecurity, excessive dowries, corruption and weak state protection.

Research¹⁸ on northern tribes indicates that this message helped them gain tribal sympathy.

In short:

“Don’t fight the entire tribal system simultaneously. Divide it, neutralise some tribes, ally with others, and defeat opponents individually.”

Once a tribe became dependent on the Houthis, the relationship could gradually evolve. The group developed mechanisms for direct engagement with tribes, offering selected leaders’ government and military posts, financial support, influence, access to resources, protection and mediation. The West Point study describes¹⁹ these arrangements as part of a broader transactional compact with tribal communities. The Houthis sought not merely tribal support but control over the tribal system itself. They appointed supervisors, known as *mushrifin*, to oversee local government, security, justice and tribal affairs. Research by the Sana’a Center indicates²⁰ that these officials have progressively weakened the traditional autonomy and authority of tribal sheikhs.

Rather than permit independent tribal leaders to form a united opposition, the Houthis have often weakened traditional leadership structures. Research by the Washington Institute describes²¹ this as a deliberate effort to prevent the emergence of a unified tribal leadership capable of coordinating

¹⁷ The Houthi partnership model: Is there a strategy behind the tactics? - Middle East Institute

¹⁸ Northern Yemeni Tribes during the Eras of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi Movement: A Comparative Study - Sana’a Center

¹⁹ CTC-SENTINEL-032026.pdf

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Coercing Compliance: The Houthis and the Tribes of Northern Yemen | The Washington Institute

resistance. This creates a dilemma: if one sheikh resists while another cooperates, the resister risks isolation. As a result, even tribes opposed to the Houthis may conclude: *“We cannot defeat them, so neutrality or cooperation is safer.”*

The Houthi strategy also targets younger generations. Once the movement controls a tribal area, recruitment supplies it with manpower while offering young men income, ideological instruction, military experience and access to loyalty networks. Oxford research characterised²² this approach as a combination of social engineering, religious indoctrination and violence, including the recruitment of tribal youth. Strategically, the Houthis seek not only to control today’s sheikhs but also to shape the next generation of tribal leaders and fighters. Like Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, they have used this approach to consolidate territorial influence and cultivate future generations as human weapons.

Houthi Current Advance

The tribal system helped enable the Houthis’ latest advance towards Bab al-Mandab, but it would be misleading to suggest that Sunni tribes simply joined them. The evidence instead points to a mix of cooperation, neutrality, opportunism, coercion and local political calculation. The offensive is particularly significant because the Houthis captured Mokha on 10 September 2026 before advancing towards Dhubab, Mayyun (Perim) and the Hanish Islands. Analysts attribute²³ the speed of the advance largely to the collapse and fragmentation of anti-Houthi forces.

The Houthis did not need every tribe to fight alongside them. Their main objective was to prevent coastal tribes from forming unified opposition. For years, they have exploited Yemen’s fragmented tribal politics and rivalries among local leaders, a strategy that predates²⁴ their 2014 seizure of Sana’a. Consequently, the latest offensive faced not a unified Yemeni army, but a collection of forces divided by command structures, tribal affiliations and external patrons.

Tribal networks can provide armed movements with human intelligence that conventional armies often struggle to obtain. Local contacts may reveal government positions, troop movements, tribal allegiances, ammunition stores, commanders, defensive preparations and political divisions. This does not imply that every tribe actively spied for the Houthis. Rather, years of political penetration gave the movement extensive relationships and detailed²⁵ knowledge of local society, reinforced by supervisors and networks that monitor tribal affairs.

The Houthis have spent years integrating tribal communities into their military apparatus. Their *“Tribal Cohesion Council”* and related bodies have mobilised²⁶ tribesmen, while Houthi authorities have required tribes to provide fighters, giving the movement a substantial manpower advantage. AP’s

22 Houthi Governance: An Examination of Engagement with Tribes | The Rule is for None but Allah: Islamist Approaches to Governance | Oxford Academic

23 The Houthis’ capture of Mocha has transformed the war in Yemen – and the geopolitics of the Red Sea | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank

24 Northern Yemeni Tribes during the Eras of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi Movement: A Comparative Study - Sana’a Center

25 Yemen’s War is Returning | International Crisis Group

26 Northern Yemeni Tribes during the Eras of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi Movement: A Comparative Study - Sana’a Center

latest assessment²⁷ estimates that Houthi forces have grown from about 30,000 fighters in 2015 to roughly 350,000 today, although wartime manpower figures remain difficult to verify. The exact total matters less than the scale of the mobilisation system the Houthis built from what was once a small Zaydi movement. Years of conflict with the Saudi-led coalition have transformed them into a larger force with substantial manpower, effective intelligence networks and sustained cooperation with local Sunni tribes. According to Michael Knights,²⁸ who has written extensively about Houthis and is now head of research at Horizon Engage, a New York-based strategic advisory.

Anti-Houthi forces along the Red Sea coast were divided among:

- Saudi-backed groups
- UAE-linked groups
- Units aligned with Yemen's internationally recognised government
- Local tribal forces
- Competing political factions

Chatham House argues²⁹ that the latest Houthi offensive exposed deep fragmentation and poor coordination among anti-Houthi forces. Rather than confronting a unified Saudi-backed army, the Houthis struck a weak point in the fractured defensive system, broke through quickly and exploited the ensuing collapse.

“They are the most committed, the most ideologically pure and the most aggressive” of Iran’s regional allies. They’ve been developed by the Iranians in a fast-track way. Things that took the Lebanese Hezbollah 20 years to develop, the Houthis have developed in five.”

The Houthis now hold strategically important positions around the strait, including Mayyun/Perim, significantly increasing their ability to threaten shipping. However, holding territory near a chokepoint is not the same as securing, administering and permanently controlling the entire passage against Saudi, Yemeni, US and other international forces. Their expansion also creates a vulnerability: the more territory and infrastructure they must defend, the more exposed they become to air and maritime attacks. The Al Jazeera Centre for Studies makes a similar point, arguing³⁰ that expansion strengthens Houthi leverage while increasing the risk of an international counter-coalition.

In short, tribal strategy alone did not deliver Bab al-Mandab to the Houthis. Instead, it created the political and social conditions for a rapid offensive by providing local intelligence and recruits, neutralising tribes, fragmenting opponents and reducing local resistance. Houthi missiles, drones and ground forces then converted that advantage into territorial gains.

²⁷ Yemen's Houthis have grown stronger through years of war | AP News

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ The Houthis' capture of Mocha has transformed the war in Yemen – and the geopolitics of the Red Sea | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank

³⁰ Expansion and Exposure: The Paradox of Houthi Control of Bab al-Mandeb | Al Jazeera Centre for Studies

Why Did the Advance Happen Now?

A key question is why the Houthis chose this moment to advance. Three factors help explain the speed of their campaign to capture territory and gain control of the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The Houthis' rapid advance and capture of key coastal towns reflect a long-planned Iranian IRGC strategy intended as a final means of achieving its objectives.

- 1- The US naval blockade of Iranian ships in the Strait of Hormuz, which has severely weakened Iran's economy.*
- 2- The aim of securing full control of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, closing the alternative route for Gulf oil shipments and particularly harming the Saudi economy.*
- 3- The desire to punish the KSA for signing the Mecca Defence Agreement.*

In recent months, the war with the US and Israel has eliminated³¹ much of Iran's military and civilian leadership, while preventing Tehran from achieving its regional military, political and strategic objectives. Iran therefore turned to its remaining option: closing the Strait of Hormuz to cripple the global economy, a strategy³² that has largely succeeded. Following the US blockade of Iranian oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, Iran turned to an alternative strategy, controlling the Bab al-Mandab Strait and fully disrupting Gulf oil exports to pressure US allies in the region to seek the blockade's removal.

The Reality of Mecca Defence Agreement

The Mecca Defence Agreement (MDA) is a military pact between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan, primarily intended to protect Saudi Arabia from external attack. It states that an armed attack on one member will be treated as an attack on all three. However, unlike NATO's Article 5, it does not yet trigger an automatic military response.

Another factor is timing: the MDA was signed on 7 August, and the Houthis attacked the Kingdom immediately one month later. The agreement remains at an early stage and is not yet fully operational. On 11 September 2026, Pakistan's Foreign Office said³³ *"it was still being 'firmed up'"* and that mechanisms and institutional frameworks had to be established before it could be operationalised." Although the political commitment is in place, the three militaries have not yet created the structures required for a rapid collective response.

An attack does not automatically mean Pakistan and Turkey attack the Houthis. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan had already explained³⁴ that the attacked country would request assistance and specify what it needs. Assistance could range from intelligence and logistics to ammunition or military forces. The agreement does not necessarily require Pakistan and Turkey to launch immediate strikes against Iran or the Houthis. This distinction separates the defence of Saudi territory from an offensive campaign against Houthi-held areas in Yemen.

³¹ The Human, Military, and Economic Cost of the Iran War and Its Long-Term Impact - NoorDahri

³² Iran's Asymmetric Leverage: Three Strategic Cards - NoorDahri

³³ Makkah pact not operational yet, still being firmed up: FO - Newspaper - DAWN.COM

³⁴ Turkiye says Mecca defence pact not aimed at Iran | News | Al Jazeera

For Example: if the Houthis launch a missile at Jazan. Saudi Arabia could request the following support from Pakistan and Turkey:

- *Additional air-defence systems*
- *Intelligence support*
- *Expanded radar coverage*
- *Fighter-aircraft support*
- *Logistical support*
- *Ammunition supplies*
- *Military personnel*

Such assistance would not necessarily entail Pakistani or Turkish strikes on the Houthi launch site in Yemen. Indeed, Pakistan said on 10 September³⁵ that no military response under the Makkah agreement was under discussion, although it would act when necessary.

It is important to recognise that the MDA is a defensive pact, not a mandate for immediate offensive action. It should therefore not be interpreted as requiring an immediate military campaign against the Houthis or Iran, particularly because Iran has not directly entered the war against the Kingdom. Although retaliation against an attacker may form part of a defensive response. However, in the current circumstances the MDA is intended to apply a deterrence strategy on different levels, as follows:

Level 1: Defensive

At this level, Pakistan and Turkey could provide fighter aircraft, air-defence systems, radar and ISR capabilities, intelligence sharing, and support in protecting Saudi airspace.

Level 2: Defensive-Offensive

At this level, both countries could strike missile and drone launch sites, degrade the attackers' military capabilities and conduct maritime interdiction.

Level 3: Full Military Intervention

At this level, Pakistan could launch an air campaign against Houthi-held territory, conduct naval operations and potentially deploy ground forces.

The agreement potentially allows a much broader response, but the decision about which level to use remains political and operational. However, Pakistan's defence minister has indicated³⁶ that Houthi attacks could trigger a higher level of response under the defence pact.

Pakistan's Foreign Office subsequently adopted a more cautious position, seeking to balance three objectives:³⁷

1. Protect Saudi Arabia

Pakistan has longstanding strategic ties with Riyadh and has reaffirmed its commitment to Saudi sovereignty and security.

³⁵ Pakistan says no military response discussed under Mecca pact over Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia | Reuters

³⁶ Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia could activate defence pact, Pakistan says | News | Al Jazeera

³⁷ Transcript of the Press Briefing by the Spokesperson on Wednesday, 10th September 2026

2. Avoid direct involvement in the Yemen war

Islamabad has repeatedly emphasised that the Mecca agreement is defensive and that it supports a peaceful settlement in Yemen.

3. Preserve diplomatic ties with Iran

This is especially important because Pakistan shares a border with Iran and seeks to avoid a direct military confrontation.

Saudia's Weak Strategy

Saudi Arabia's key weakness is not a lack of military power, but its difficulty translating overwhelming conventional superiority into a decisive outcome against a Houthi force that relies on mountainous terrain, dispersed networks, local alliances and asymmetric weapons. Saudi Arabia can use overwhelming air power to destroy Houthi military bases, drone facilities, ammunition depots and missile factories, but it cannot eradicate the group's leadership, concealed strongholds, extensive community networks, ideology or tribal influence.

A second weakness is the anti-Houthi bloc, which remains fragmented by political, regional and internal rivalry. According to Chatham House:³⁸

“Saudi Arabia does not command a single, unified Yemeni army. The anti-Houthi camp contains forces with different political objectives and different external patrons. Saudi efforts since early 2026 to create a more coherent command structure have not overcome years of fragmentation.”

Saudi Arabia may supply weapons, funding and air support, yet the ground forces can still struggle to coordinate effectively. Air power can destroy Houthi targets, but Saudi Arabia cannot retain lasting control of Mokha, Dhubab, Perim, the coastal plain or mountain passes without dependable Yemeni ground forces. AP's latest assessment reaches the same conclusion;³⁹ *“a lasting military defeat of the Houthis would require ground forces, while the forces opposing them remain divided.”*

Saudi Arabia possesses strong technical intelligence capabilities, but operations in Yemen also depend on human intelligence. Over years, the Houthis have built tribal ties, informant networks, security structures and systems for monitoring opponents. These networks provide ground-level insights that satellites and aircraft cannot easily capture. Saudi Arabia may observe much from the air, but the Houthis often have a deeper understanding of events on the ground.

³⁸ The Houthis' capture of Mocha has transformed the war in Yemen – and the geopolitics of the Red Sea | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank

³⁹ Yemen's Houthis have grown stronger through years of war | AP News

The 2022 ceasefire did not halt the Houthis' military development. Chatham House reports⁴⁰ that during the subsequent period of relative calm, the group recruited personnel, expanded mobilisation, strengthened domestic weapons production and enhanced its missile and drone capabilities. Saudi Arabia therefore now confronts a more militarily sophisticated movement than it did during the earlier stages of the Yemen war. Despite its overwhelming conventional military strength, Saudi Arabia struggles to translate that advantage into effective control on the ground because its Yemeni partners remain divided and the Houthis retain strong asymmetric, tribal and Iranian-backed capabilities.

Another reality is that the MDA cannot shield Saudi Arabia from the Houthi advance or attacks on oil infrastructure, which have severely damaged the Kingdom's production and economic capacity. Saudi Arabia has been forced to shut its East–West pipeline and lacks an alternative route for exporting oil. According to the Times,⁴¹

“Riyadh’s new Mecca defence pact with Pakistan and Turkey has proved useless in dealing with Houthi drones. And the global economic stability that Bin Salman craves is being shot to pieces. The central failure is that of the Gulf states to co-operate more deeply in defence of their own basic interests, to ensure that their product can travel safely, without subversive or physical challenge, across the sea to their customers in China and Asia.”

Saudi Arabia is stretched across several fronts and lacks the intelligence capacity, operational experience and manpower to address them simultaneously. The Kingdom has long relied on allies to protect its interests, without anticipating that those partners might themselves become embroiled in costly conflicts. To the north, Iran-backed Iraqi militias have struck the East–West pipeline. To the south, the Houthis are advancing along Yemen's Red Sea coast and threatening the Bab al-Mandab Strait. To the east, the war with Iran has disrupted the Strait of Hormuz. At the centre is Saudi Arabia, led by a crown prince whose economic transformation rested on the assumption that regional wars could be kept at a distance.

Since hostilities erupted between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, both sides have claimed to have carried out drone, missile and air strikes against each other. The Houthis say Saudi Arabia has conducted more than 1,100 air and missile strike,⁴² killing more than 800 people.⁴³ Although Saudi Arabia possesses one of the world's strongest arsenals and its army is capable of ground combat, it relies primarily on air strikes because its ground strategy is less effective against the Houthis, who are better suited to the local terrain than foreign forces.

40 The Houthis' capture of Mocha has transformed the war in Yemen – and the geopolitics of the Red Sea | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank

41 How a ragamuffin army of Houthis threatens global energy markets

42 Yemen rivals trade claims over airstrikes across several provinces

43 Over 800 Killed in Renewed Houthi-Saudi War in Yemen, W.H.O. Says - The New York Times

The Houthis escalated the conflict by launching drones towards Mecca,⁴⁴ Islam's holiest site, and striking Riyadh on 19th September, damaging King Khalid International Airport.⁴⁵ Saudi air defence also intercepted a Houthi ballistic missile targeting Riyadh.

According to Dr Rob Geist Pinfold,⁴⁶ a lecturer in international security at King's College London,

“His entire grand strategy has subsequently been predicated on creating a stable regional environment in which Saudi Arabia can focus inward on economic transformation. That entire grand strategy is now under unprecedented threat.”

Saudi's Western Allies

Saudi Arabia has sought support from allies including the US, UK, France, Germany and the UAE. Although the US declined to join military operations against the Houthis, it agreed to provide military advisers. Western governments must recognise Saudi Arabia as a vital Gulf ally rather than turn away from it. The Houthi advance along Yemen's Red Sea coast has severely undermined global security: Saudi-backed forces collapsed, allowing the Iran-backed group to seize the port of Mocha. Saudi Arabia lies between two of the world's most important maritime chokepoints, Hormuz to the east and Bab al-Mandeb to the south-west.⁴⁷ These gains give the Houthis unprecedented leverage over oil shipments, maritime traffic through the Red Sea and Suez Canal, and global trade.

US President Trump appears to have overlooked Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's historic pledge to invest one trillion dollars in support of the US economy, in addition to Saudi Arabia's substantial expenditure on American weaponry. By contrast, Britain has announced that it will provide “defensive” air-to-air refuelling support for Saudi strikes.⁴⁸ The US has clearly aided the Saudi air force with intelligence on targets and Houthi deployments, contributing to dozens of successful strikes. However, the US and its Western allies must do more to defeat the Houthis.

The rebels initially targeted Saudi oil tankers, supporting Iran's effort to block oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz. Last month, Houthi-aligned forces in Iraq bombed a pipeline carrying oil from the Iranian-blockaded Persian Gulf to the Red Sea, threatening to remove more than 4 per cent of global oil supplies from the market.

With Hamas and Hezbollah severely weakened by the war with Israel, and Syria lost to a Sunni jihadist regime, the Houthis are Iran's last remaining instrument of resistance. This is therefore a critical moment for the West to provide the military and intelligence support needed to weaken the Houthis'

44 Saudi Arabia says it shot down Houthi drone south of Mecca - BBC News

45 Houthis claim attacks on 'sensitive sites' in Saudi Arabian capital - The Washington Post

46 Mohammed bin Salman under siege and running out of friends as Saudi dream falters

47 Why the battle for the Bab al-Mandeb Strait matters for Britain

48 RAF to provide support for Saudi Arabia to tackle Houthi attacks

capabilities. The US president has disappointed Saudi Arabia by abandoning it in the midst of war, echoing former president Barack Obama's response when the Kingdom and its allies launched their campaign against the Houthis in 2015. According to Michael Ratney,⁴⁹ a former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia and senior adviser to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, *"At a moment when America's ally is under fire from its arch-enemy, the US president is telling the world that he's talking to that enemy but has only convinced them not to attack America."*

Saudi's Last Regional Hope

The State of Israel has agreed to provide Intel sharing through the US CENTCOM to the authorities of the KSA to defeat Houthis, the Iranian last proxy in the Middle East. Israel is capable to defeat Houthis by applying multiple defence and intel strategies. Israel has also severely damaged Houthis by directly attacking them in Yemen. Israel struck Houthi ports and military infrastructure as well as their leadership successfully and damaged their capability to strike Israel in the future.

For example:

- 1- *July 2024 – Hodeidah*:⁵⁰ Israel struck the port and fuel storage after a Houthi drone attack on Tel Aviv. A Yemeni Archive investigation reported damage to port and power infrastructure.
- 2- *December 2024 – Red Sea ports and Sanaa*:⁵¹ Israel targeted Houthi infrastructure at Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Isa, then energy infrastructure in Sanaa.
- 3- *May 2025 – Hodeidah and Sanaa*:⁵² After a missile landed near Israel's main airport, Israel targeted about 70% of the port's five docks, warehouses and customs area, Israel said it used 50 munitions to disable Sanaa's main airport and hit power stations and a concrete plant.
- 4- *July 2025 – Red Sea ports*:⁵³ Israel again struck Hodeidah, Ras Isa and Salif, as well as power infrastructure. A UN expert report later said repeated attacks from September 2024 to July 2025 caused extensive damage and reduced port capacity.
- 5- *August 2025 – Houthi leadership in Sanaa*:⁵⁴ A strike killed the Houthi-run government's prime minister and several ministers, according to the group's own announcement and Reuters reporting. Israel later said the Houthi chief of staff, Muhammad al-Ghamari, died from wounds sustained.

Damage to port facilities likely constrained Houthi logistics, while the deaths of senior figures disrupted the group's leadership. The public record indicates substantial infrastructure damage and significant leadership losses. However, Israel neither destroyed the Houthi military nor ended its capacity to attack, because it pursued limited strikes aimed at stopping missiles and drones targeting Israel rather than launching a full-scale military operation.

Saudi Arabia has lost confidence in the US, its most powerful ally, despite hosting and supporting American military bases in the Kingdom and across the Gulf. The US has announced its permanent withdrawal from bases in Syria and Iraq. Saudi Arabia has consequently formed a defensive pact with

49 Saudi Arabia stands against the Houthis as allies turn away

50 Airstrikes on Al Hudaydah Port, Yemen | Yemeni Archive

51 Israeli airstrikes hit Yemen, kills at least 9 people | AP News

52 Israel strikes Yemen's Hodeidah Port after Houthi attack on Israeli airport By Reuters

53 Letter dated 15 October 2025 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council

54 Chief of staff of Houthi military was killed in an Israeli strike | AP News

Turkey and Pakistan, although their national interests limit their willingness to wage a full-scale campaign against Iran or its proxies.

Israel is the only remaining regional power with the military and intelligence capabilities to strike Iran and its proxies simultaneously. Despite fighting on seven fronts for the past three years and lacking diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, Israel continues to share intelligence on the Houthis with the Kingdom through US authorities. Israel also has a strategic interest in preventing the Houthis from gaining full control of Bab al-Mandab, as they could then block Israeli trade shipments from Asia passing through the strait.

As Israel's only commercial Red Sea port, Eilat has already suffered a sharp decline in direct shipping. The Jerusalem Post reported⁵⁵ that ship calls fell from 132 in 2023 to 16 in 2024 as major shipping lines suspended regular services. Cargo can be rerouted through other ports or, for some imports, Aqaba, but this adds time, handling and expense. Eilat provides Israel with an alternative maritime route if its Mediterranean ports are disrupted. A sustained threat to Red Sea access could undermine this fallback and give the Houthis leverage over Israeli trade and regional security. However, a “closed” strait may mean an effective closure, with ships diverting because of the danger, rather than the Houthis physically stopping every vessel.

Saudi Arabia's accession to the Abraham Accords could provide the Kingdom with lasting security, economic growth, support for developing civilian nuclear power, intelligence-sharing on ground and aerial threats, and military training to strengthen its ability to defend itself without foreign assistance. The Kingdom must recognise that neighbouring Israel understands the region and its adversaries, as demonstrated by its strikes against and elimination of senior Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, as well as Iran's supreme leader. Supporting Palestinian statehood alone cannot guarantee the Kingdom's security; it may still face enemy attacks that threaten its protection and hinder economic growth.

⁵⁵ Houthi threats continue endangering future of Port of Eilat shipping | The Jerusalem Post

