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Ansar Allah, an insurgent movement on the rise

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Abstract:

Due to its control of much of the Yemeni coastline, the Houthi insurgency has succeeded in extending military objectives to the adjacent maritime space and the Ansar Allah group is now known globally because it has threatened the safety of maritime traffic in the Red Sea, a major international shipping lane. On the other hand, the circumstance of facing two major naval operations has added to the importance accorded to the group.

The insurgent movement has acquired sufficient combat capability to ensure that its armed activity will continue in Yemen and in the maritime space. However, this qualitative leap could not have been realized without external strategic direction and the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). With the two naval operations in the Red Sea, it is possible that stability may be restored to this sea route.

Keywords:

Houthis, Ansar Allah, Zaydism, Red Sea, Aspides, Prosperity Guardian.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Documents** are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) or the Ministry of Defence.

Ansar Allah, un movimiento insurgente en fase de ascenso

Resumen:

Debido al control de gran parte de la costa yemení, la insurgencia huti ha logrado ampliar los objetivos militares al espacio marítimo adyacente y el grupo Ansar Allah ahora se conoce a nivel global porque ha amenazado la seguridad del tráfico marítimo en el mar Rojo, una de las vías principales del transporte internacional. Por otro lado, la circunstancia de enfrentarse a dos operaciones navales de gran envergadura ha redundado en la importancia que se le ha concedido al grupo.

El movimiento insurgente ha adquirido suficiente capacidad de combate lo que garantiza que su actividad armada continúe en Yemen y en el espacio marítimo. No obstante, este salto cualitativo no habría podido realizarse sin la dirección estratégica exterior y la utilización de vehículos aéreos no tripulados (UAV). Con las dos operaciones navales en el mar Rojo, es posible que se recupere la situación de estabilidad en esta ruta marítima.

Palabras clave:

Hutíes, Ansar Allah, zaidismo, mar Rojo, Aspides, Guardián de la Prosperidad.

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Introduction

The countries of the Arabian Peninsula have a less hostile relationship with Israel than Iran, Syria or Iraq. These monarchies have been promoting moderate dynamics in their interaction with Israel.

During 2020, Israel emerged into the Persian Gulf space thanks to the signing of the Abraham Accords by Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In the UAE, support for Israel took the form of Israeli companies in the cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, one of which, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), installed a Barak Air Defence System.

The signing of the Abraham Accords, also called the normalisation process, implies recognition of the State of Israel. The other signatories, in addition to the UAE and Bahrain, are Sudan and Morocco. As for Saudi Arabia, and due to its process of change, trust with Israel was being fostered, a policy of rapprochement that became evident after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's declaration in September 2023 that Saudi Arabia was getting closer to Israel day after day.

Conversely, Iran practises absolute anti-Zionism, which denies the Jewish people the right to a State and therefore rejects the existence of the State of Israel. Thus, Riyadh's possible accession to the Abraham Accords and the threat of Israeli penetration into Iran's own security margins in the Persian Gulf were therefore highly adverse developments for its regional and international position.

In response to the so-called normalisation process between Arab countries and Israel, the Islamic Republic of Iran has opened two areas of confrontation, by land in the Gaza Strip and by sea in the Red Sea, through actors with common interests.

It should be noted that maritime insurance policies immediately ¹ shot up by 400% and shipping through the Suez Canal fell by 40%. For this reason, Egypt is one of the most affected countries. Egypt has experienced two black swan events since last year that have unbalanced its economy which already had serious weaknesses such as a negative balance of payments and a large public and foreign debt. With no diversification plans,

¹ POZO, E. [«Los ataques en el mar Rojo disparan en España hasta un 400 % el precio del seguro |», Seguros \(expansion.com\)](#) (accessed on 12/02/2024).

Egypt's only State revenues are tourism and the Suez Canal, but the Gaza war and Houthi militia attacks have caused its main sources of income to plummet.

The elements that determine Houthi intervention in the conflict, taking advantage of the opportunity offered by the Hamas attack, are as follows:

Yemen's possession of a large part of the Red Sea coast;

Military experience and suitable weaponry;

Support from Iran;

Narrative and discourse that matches Houthi slogans (God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews! Victory for Islam!).

Military action has become the most important part of the organisation's activity, with well-equipped land forces and attacks in the Red Sea responding to a series of well-defined targets; these military actions have had a strong psychological and propaganda impact, which have contributed to the importance attached to the group.

Within the complexity of the current situation, this paper analyses a militia with links to Tehran, namely the Houthis (Ansar Allah)², in order to assess the strength and permanence of this movement over time, taking into account three parameters: the community base that supports it, its military capabilities, and the armed actions it is carrying out.

The community base, Zaydism

Community base is widely understood as the population, class, group or social sector on behalf of which the organisation acts and from which it receives support, and unless the group is a sect, it always has behind it a base that feels identified with its discourse and with its defence actions.

² Ansar Allah's armed activity emerges in the unstable situation in Yemen, a conflict that is described in TORREGROSA, Natalia. «Yemen, catástrofe humanitaria y entorno alejado de la estabilidad», in [Geopolitical Conflict Outlook 2023 \(ieee.es\)](#). Chapter Eight, pp.197-222.

Experts are almost unanimous in their opinion that it is important to describe the community base: As Martha Crenshaw³ points out, the longevity of an organisation is based on the size of its community base, and De la Corte Ibáñez⁴ notes that “only organisations capable of fostering loyalty and sympathy among the members of some community of reference can survive long enough to develop a sufficiently effective campaign of violence” (trans.).

Currently, the Zaydi population is estimated to be between 10 and 12 million, a number that would later swell the ranks of armed militants. Unlike Twelver Shi'ism, Zaydism claims that the fifth imam is the hidden imam awaiting his return at the end of times as the Mahdi, and it is the majority religion in the northern and western regions of Yemen.

This reference population has been gaining ground since the leadership of Hussein Badreddin al-Huti, when a renewal movement emerged in the Zaidi group with the formation of two political parties, Truth and Believing Youth.



Figure 1. The Houthi movement was named after its founder, Hussein Badreddin al-Huti (left), his brother, Abdul Malik al-Huti, is its current leader.

After the invasion of Iraq, the political and religious movement was also transformed into a military movement under the name of Ansar Allah. After, in September 2004, Hussein al-Houthi was eliminated by the Yemeni Army, the movement is also known by the generic name of its founder.

³ CRENSHAW, M. «La lógica del terrorismo: comportamiento terrorista como producto de una elección estratégica», in REICH, W. *Orígenes del terrorismo: psicología, ideología, teología, estados mentales*. Pomares-Corredor, Barcelona, 1994, pp. 17-35.

⁴ DE LA CORTE Ibáñez, Luis. *La lógica del terrorismo*. Alianza Editorial, 2006, p. 135.

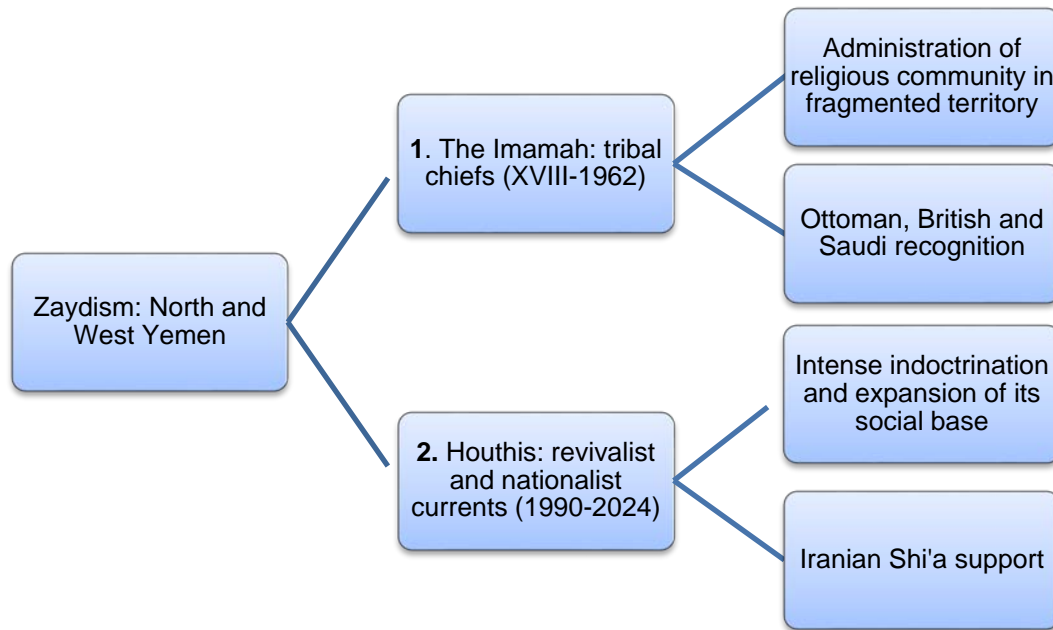


Figure 2. Zaydism, the identity and religious bases of the Houthis.
Source: developed by author.

Military capabilities

The insurgency's military capability has been forged over nine years of conventional warfare in Yemen, through prolonged and sustained military operations during that time. In addition, the current operational context has revealed that it has been equipped with equipment and systems incorporating advanced technologies:

- The Houthi Armed Forces⁵, are integrated into a command-and-control structure, with a sizeable contingent of between 20,000 and 200,000 soldiers and, according to claims by insurgent leaders, between 165,000 and 600,000 reservists have been trained.
- Ground forces employ AK-47 rifles, armoured vehicles, helicopters, F-5 aircraft, man-portable anti-aircraft missiles (MANPAD), armed and reconnaissance UAVs and naval weapons and mines. In addition, they possess medium (Toophan) and short-range (Fateh-110) ballistic missile systems, anti-ship (Al-Mandab-1, Asef,

⁵ Part of the information on the Houthi insurgency's military capabilities and contingent is drawn from two publications by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) think tank: *The Armed Conflict Survey, 2022*, "Conflict Report Yemen" (pp. 167-168) y *The Military Balance 2023*, "Yemen" (pp. 362-363) y *Combined Maritime Forces (IMF): Open Source Monthly* (20th October 2023, p. 5).

Falaq and Fateh-110), anti-aircraft (Baraq-2) and versions of the Iranian Sayyed surface-to-air missile⁶.

- Finally, it is worth noting that the US Central Command (CENTCOM)⁷, publishes the almost daily air strikes carried out by the US-UK-led military coalition⁸, on locations in western Yemen, against positions where military installations are located in underground warehouses. It also identifies the advanced assets that the coalition is engaging: unmanned surface vessels (USV), anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM), mobile anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM) and unmanned aerial vehicles (OWA UAV).



Figure 3. Houthi missile and UAV capabilities have grown thanks to Iranian technological assembly.
Source: Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA): [Iran_Houthi_Final2.pdf \(dia.mil\)](#)

Many of the Houthis' military operations have labelled as terrorist operations, although this qualification, as applied to the armed group, has not yet been fully agreed upon in the international arena⁹, partly due to the impact of the use of this term on the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Since the start of the attacks against Ansar Allah in response to their attacks in the Red Sea, they have been published daily on the official CENTCOM website. Available at: [Home \(centcom.mil\)](#) and [PRESS RELEASES \(centcom.mil\)](#).

⁸ US and UK air capabilities correspond to the publication: *JANES (terrorism-insurgency-events)*, which mentions the aircraft used against Ansar Allah, between late 2023 and 2024, Typhoon-type aircraft from the British military base in Akrotiri, Cyprus, F-A-18 Howler and F-A-18 Hornets, the USS Laboon of the Arleigh Burke class of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group, etc.

⁹ A reading of successive UNSC briefings, and especially the February 2022 session, highlights the lack of an agreed definition of a terrorist group applied to the Houthis by the UNSC members: [Yemen Chronology of Events : Security Council Report](#).

humanitarian situation in Yemen. In 2022, the UAE and the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), the internationally recognised authority in Yemen, placed Ansar Allah on Yemen's list of terrorist groups, and the US placed it back on its list of terrorist organisations on 17th January in response to attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea in recent months.

In any case, the military leaders are subject to the Yemen Sanctions Committee established by UN Resolution 2140 (targeted arms embargo, asset freeze and travel ban). Between September and October 2022, Mansur Al-Sa'adi, the commander of Yemen's Naval and Coastal Defence Forces, Motlaq Amer Al-Marrani, the former Deputy Head of the National Security Office, and Ahmad al-Hamzi, the commander of the Air Force and Air Defence Forces and the UAV Programme, were included in the sanctions.

Military actions

During Yemen's armed conflict, the pro-government coalition, consisting of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and the Southern Transitional Council (STC)¹⁰, has been funded and well-defended by Saudi Arabia and the US, which are among the world's largest importers of major weapons.

However, despite the backing and superiority in terms of weapons of these powers, pro-government forces have not displayed much cohesion against the Houthi rebels. In fact, the Yemeni Government's weakness has been exacerbated and it has lost control of important areas of the country.

The first Houthi military objective was to attack and occupy the Yemeni Government's centre of gravity, the capital in Sana'a. In 2011, the Arab Spring led to major instability in

¹⁰ The PLC and STC are integrated into a presidential body, with Rashad Al-Alimi as the country's President, formed on 7th April 2022, at the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council: It is composed of eight Vice-Presidencies with members from the North and the South, in order to unite the anti-Houthi coalition and facilitate the restoration of Yemen's territorial unity.

Yemen that ended in the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the transfer of his powers to the Vice-President of the Government, Mansur al-Hadi.

In this environment of political deterioration, the Houthi movement, with the help of the former President, succeeded in ousting the Government from the capital on 21st September 2014.¹¹ It then dissolved Parliament and finally founded the Supreme Revolutionary Council. The break-up of the centre was completed in December 2017 and led to the relocation of the Government to the city of Aden.

Since the establishment of a government, with its capital in Sana'a, and the control of the headquarters of one of Yemen's two central banks, the Group has managed to dominate most of the northern territories. The provinces of Dhala, Hodeida, Marib, Sa'ada and Taiz, currently under its control, have seen the heaviest fighting since the last quarter of 2022 until today, with a large number of casualties and displaced people¹².

Starting from this territorial base, they are pursuing two objectives: first, to dominate at least one of the three provinces, Marib, Shabwah or Hadramaut, where the main oil and gas fields are concentrated, and second, to penetrate the areas of Aden and Lahej, the main provinces of the Southern Transitional Council (CTS)¹³. Indeed, hostilities have persisted in the governorates of Marib and Shabwah, and in towns along the Marib-Shabwah provincial border. Confrontations against CTS positions are constant in the south, especially in the provinces of Lahej, Abyan and Dhala, areas where AQAP is also active¹⁴.

In terms of basic resources, the conflict has virtually wiped out assets, local agricultural production, reduced household and national incomes and destroyed the transport

¹¹ Since then, the Houthis have been celebrating the Anniversary of the Revolution on 21st September.

¹² Statistics from the Analysis Centre: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Available at: <https://acleddata.com/middle-east/yemen/> (accessed on 19/03/2024).

¹³ The Southern Transitional Council (STC) was created in 2017 by a faction of the Southern Movement and has a plan to advocate for a separate State. Southern political factions gather in Aden to hold the Southern National Consultative Meeting and at the last one, in May 2023, they signed the National Charter, in which several groups joined the STC in addition to calling on international society to respect their right to be an independent State.

¹⁴ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQPA9 has not carried out any attacks against Ansar Allah between July 2022 and June 2023. This encouraged speculation in Yemeni media that the two armed groups were cooperating: Janes: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Group profile. Alliances and Rivalries (accessed on 05/04/2024).

network¹⁵ in addition to the presence now of land mines and explosive remnants of war¹⁶ that impede reconstruction and further increase economic recession.

A phenomenon that further impoverishes Yemen is Ansar Allah's violence against groups and individuals who have some social or economic relevance in the areas under its rule: targeted attacks on medical personnel and civil servants in their own homes, health clinics or administrative centres, assaults and attacks on shops and markets, and blockades of trucks carrying goods. In provinces where they have with less influence, such as Ibb, violence against the population is more extreme, with courts handing down death sentences, extortion, sacking of shops and bombings of villages¹⁷.

The infrastructures and communication routes, particularly ports and airports have been materially damaged. It should be noted that humanitarian aid is received, and goods are moved along these routes.

In the provinces of Sana'a, Hodeida, Taiz, airports are under Houthi control and transportation routes, including airports, were the subject of negotiations during the truce period in 2022¹⁸.

For its renewal, Hans Grundberg, the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, demanded that the Houthis resume commercial flights at Sana'a Airport for the first time in six years, in order to make progress in reopening the transportation routes in Taiz province and to provide a regular flow of fuel to the port of Hodeida. However, flights at Sana'a Airport were not restored, although fuel shortages in the capital and elsewhere were remedied by the arrival of some tankers at the port of Hodeida.

¹⁵ Data for infrastructure and economy are from the World Bank. Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/351911650316441159/pdf/Yemen-Country-Engagement-Note-for-the-Period-FY22-FY23.pdf>. Indeed, according to the United Nations Human Development Index, based on the three variables of GDP, life expectancy and education, Yemen ranks 183 out of 191 countries. Available at: <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>.

¹⁶ The Yemeni Landmine Monitor has documented that more than one million have been scattered since the end of 2014.

¹⁷ Violent incidents against the civilian population in Ansar Allah-held provinces between late 2023 and 2024 come from: JANES (Violent Risks Intelligence Bulletin).

¹⁸ The most notable event in 2022 was the UN-brokered truce period, which was renewed twice and extended for six months between 1st April and 2nd October. During the truce, both sides violated the ceasefire and the persistence of hostilities revealed that it would not be renewed again.

On 17th June 2023, the first commercial flight from Sana'a airport to Jeddah took place following the first direct talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi authorities. In fact, during these negotiations, the issues focused on the reopening of the Houthi-controlled ports, Sana'a airport, infrastructure reconstruction, public sector salary payments and a roadmap for the departure of foreign forces.

With the resumption of hostilities, flights to and from the airports have again been halted. Hodeida Airport is currently protected by air defence teams deployed by the Houthis and aircraft have been banned from landing, as in January 2024, when a plane from Sudan with 138 Yemeni nationals was prevented from landing at Mokha Airport and had to turn back.

Finally, following the Hamas attack in October 2023, the Houthis, with a narrative in defence of the Palestinian people and in response to the counter-offensive in the Gaza Strip, seized the opportunity to become active in this conflict. Two thousand kilometres away and without moving from their positions, they commenced missile and UAV attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea¹⁹.

However, this qualitative leap could not have been made without Iran's strategic leadership and the use of UAVs, whose aerial interception and neutralisation pose a major challenge as attacks are sustained at rapid speeds on merchant ships, which are civilian targets without air defence and electronic warfare capabilities.

Since then, the safety of navigation on one of the main international transport routes has been under threat. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), container ship traffic is down by 67%, with tankers and gas tankers also experiencing significant declines²⁰, as well as causing some environmental disasters²¹.

¹⁹ This strategy began on 19th November 2023 following the hijacking of an Israeli-flagged cargo ship. *El impacto de la guerra de Gaza en Oriente Medio*, 2024, nº 234, Fundación Alternativas, (p.33). Available at: [GAZA ORIENTE MEDIO.pdf \(fundacionalternativas.org\)](#)

²⁰ [Mar Rojo, Mar Negro y Canal de Panamá: UNCTAD alza la voz de alarma sobre las perturbaciones del comercio mundial | UNCTAD](#) (accessed on 08/03/2024).

²¹ «Marea negra tras el ataque al carguero Rubymar, en febrero de 2024, que trasportaba 41.000 toneladas de fertilizantes», *Informe Semanal de Política Exterior*, no. 1360. 5th March 2024, p.3. available at: [Política Exterior | Análisis internacional en español \(politicaexterior.com\)](#) (accessed on 19/03/2024).

In parallel, and to minimise the impact on maritime traffic, two operations have been deployed in the Red Sea: the first, Prosperity Guardian, the US²² and UK, with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand and France²³, are launching a series of strikes against Houthi military positions in Yemen; the second being the naval air Operation Aspides, deployed by the European Union in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2722 of 10th January, which condemns Houthi attacks and recognises the right of Member States to defend their vessels against attack or to impede their freedom of navigation.²⁴

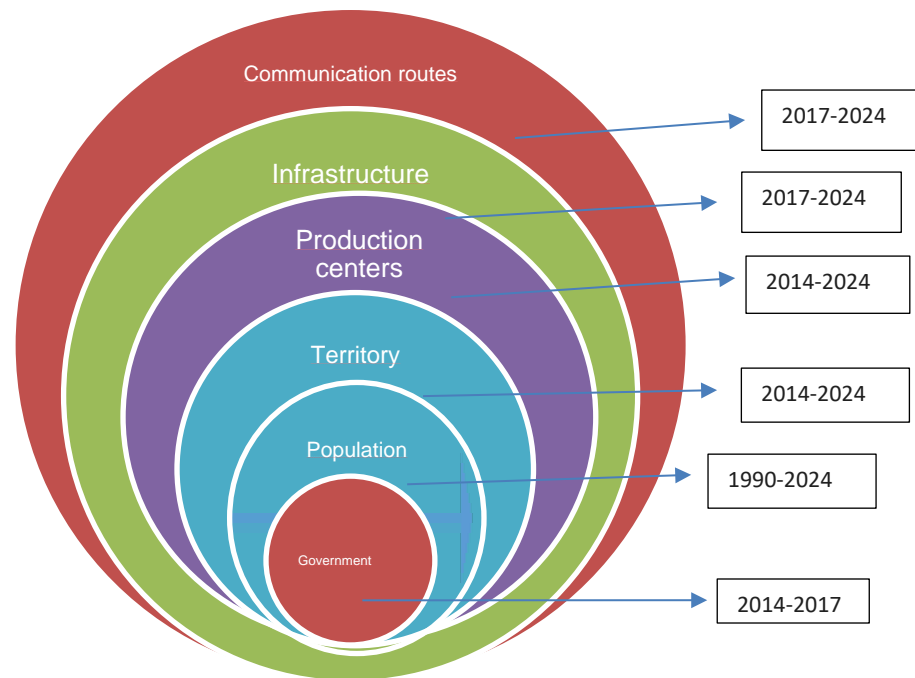


Figure 4. The Houthi (Ansar Allah) military actions pursue clearly defined objectives.
Source: developed by author.

²² «"The US has around 40,000 ground troops in the area (13,000 in Kuwait, 10,000 in Qatar, 9,000 in Bahrain, 3,000 in Jordan, 2,500 in Iraq); in other words, it offers the same number of targets to Iran and all its regional pawns." (trans.), *Informe Semanal de Política Exterior*, no. 1365. 5th February 2024, p.1. available at: [Política Exterior | Análisis internacional en español \(politicaexterior.com\)](https://www.politicaexterior.com) (accessed on 06/02/2024).

²³ At the end of January, "France sent the frigate Alsace to the Red Sea to replace the Languedoc, which has acted as escort ship for the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group" (trans.)). Available at: <https://www.defensa.com/defensa-naval/marina-nacional-francesa-manda-mejor-fragata-antiaerea-mar-rojo> (accessed on 06/02/2024).

²⁴ The Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz Straits are under the control of Agenor and it is not yet known whether it will be integrated into Aspides: On 20th January 2020, eight European countries, led by France, organised the operation, EMASoH (European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz) to cover the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and part of the Arabian Sea with a mission consisting of a diplomatic track and a military track with a naval air component called Operation AGENOR. Currently, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal are the participating countries. Available at: [Home | EMASoH \(emasoh-agenor.org\)](https://emasoh-agenor.org) (accessed on 27/02/2024).

Conclusions

The Houthi insurgency began as a rebel group against Yemeni Government Forces, which were by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and is now a regional actor with military power that has gained strength in terms of territorial control: it spread from the Northern provinces and now occupies 30% of the territory. It therefore presents itself as a skilled and experienced force, forged in a long war.

According to the three above-mentioned parameters (community base, military capabilities and armed actions), Ansar Allah is a strong and growing militia. This guarantees that its armed activity will continue in Yemen and at sea. However, it is possible that, in the short term, naval operations in the Red Sea will restore stability in this sea lane

With regard to the community base, the Zaidi population has expanded in recent years, which in turn increases the availability of military troops. Moreover, the Houthi authorities' support for the Palestinian cause makes it feasible for them to increase their supporters among the Sunni ranks in Yemen. Finally, in order to make an impression on the population in their areas, they will continue to carry out exemplary violent actions against groups and individuals with certain social or economic significance²⁵.

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²⁵ On terrorism... "They strike at the strong (the State or the international community) by attacking the weak (civilians or non-combatants) in order to generate fear in the community." (trans.) in AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico. *La guerra. Teoría para comprender los conflictos del siglo XXI*. El viejo Topo, 2024, p. 259.