



Iranian Backing for the Houthis during the Gaza Strip War: the Seizure of the *Al-Sharwa* as a Test Case

August 17, 2025

Overview

- ▶ Iran began transferring large-scale arms shipments to the Houthis in 2009, with the amounts increasing after the Houthi takeover of Sanaa and the coalition established to act against the Houthis led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2014–2015. From Iran's perspective, backing the Houthis enables the Islamic Republic to gain a foothold in the strategic Red Sea region on Saudi Arabia's border and helps strengthen the "resistance axis"¹ against Israel.
- ▶ Since the start of the war in the Gaza Strip in October 2023, **five attempts to smuggle weapons and other military equipment to the Houthis, allegedly sent by Iran, have been foiled.** The contraband items included components for ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, UAVs, radar devices, and advanced systems for communications, control and signal jamming.
- ▶ **On June 27, 2025, Yemeni forces opposed to the Houthis seized the vessel *al-Sharwa*, which carried more than 750 tons of weapons and military equipment disguised as civilian goods, including hundreds of cruise missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, anti-ship missiles, advanced warheads, and hundreds of UAV engines, along with instruction manuals in Persian.**
- ▶ Recorded confessions of the ship's seven crew members revealed the existence of a broad Iran-Houthi smuggling network which began operating in 2013 and spans countries from the Middle East to Africa. The confessions exposed the smuggling routes from Iran to the Houthis and the identities of senior Houthis involved in operating the network who are in contact with the Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah.
- ▶ Iranian officials denied that Tehran transferred munitions to the Houthis and claimed it was American propaganda intended to divert attention from [alleged] "Zionist crimes."
- ▶ **In ITIC assessment the seizure of the weapons and the exposure of the Iran-Houthi smuggling network indicate Iranian efforts to back the Houthis and suggest there were many other shipments which were not intercepted and did reach the Houthis. Despite the**

¹ Iran, Hezbollah, the Palestinian organizations, the Houthis in Yemen and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq.

seizure of the *al-Sharwa*, it can be assumed that Iran and the Houthis will continue their efforts to smuggle weapons through routes that bypass American and Allied monitoring and control measures in the Red Sea. In addition, the use of boats which do not require complex mechanical systems for unloading enables the Houthis to continue their smuggling activities despite Israel's damage to their seaports.

Background Information²

- ▶ According to assessments, the connection between Iran and the Houthis began after the establishment of the Ansar Allah movement [the official name of the Houthi movement] in the 1990s. However, active Iranian involvement in backing the Houthis began in 2004, with the outbreak of the Houthi uprising against the Yemeni regime headed by President Ali Abdallah Saleh. In Iranian perspective, Yemen's location at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, near the Bab al-Mandab Strait and East Africa, as well as its proximity to Saudi Arabia, made the country a strategic Iranian target, since the Zaydi Shi'ite Houthis could be used as a tool to expand the Islamic Republic's regional influence through the "resistance axis."³
- ▶ Since 2009, information has been received regarding large arms transfers from Iran to the Houthis. Iranian backing intensified during the protests against Saleh's regime in 2011 during the Arab Spring, when Tehran also transferred cutting-edge weapons to the Houthis, such as ballistic missiles and advanced anti-tank missiles, and later UAVs.
- ▶ Iranian assistance continued more intensively after the Houthi takeover of Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, in 2014, after which a coalition against the Houthis was formed under the leadership of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Although the coalition launched aerial attacks on Houthi targets and imposed an air, sea and land blockade on their areas of control in Yemen, Iran managed to smuggle weapons and send advisors from the Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah to train the Houthi forces in their use. Iranian assistance enabled the Houthis to attack Saudi Arabia and the UAE with ballistic missiles and UAVs.
- ▶ The Gaza Strip War, which began with the Hamas terrorist attack and massacre on October 7, 2023, gave the Houthis the opportunity to take an active part in the "resistance axis support front" in the Gaza Strip, part of the concept of the "unity of the fronts" promoted by the Iranian regime against Israel. In the 22 months since the start of Houthi activity against Israel on

² For further information, see the February 2023 ITIC report, [The Houthi Movement and the War in Yemen: Development and Significance](#)

³ Iran, Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Houthis in Yemen and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, all of whose objective is the destruction and elimination of the State of Israel.

October 19, 2023, the Houthis have claimed responsibility for about 200 attacks on targets in Israel, using ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and UAVs, sometimes in cooperation with pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. The Houthis claimed responsibility for attacks on ships in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean on the pretext of violating the "embargo" on ships sailing to Israeli ports, which were under Houthi "siege." Since late November 2024, since the implementation of the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon and the halt of attacks by pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, the Houthis have remained the only "resistance axis support front" continuing to attack Israel.⁴

►Houthi involvement was minimal during the 12-day Israel-Iran War in June 2025, as according to the IDF they launched two to three ballistic missiles at Israel. Conversely, the Houthis' military spokesperson, Yahya Saria, claimed responsibility for launching a "number" of Palestine 2 hypersonic ballistic missiles at "sensitive targets in the area of occupied Jaffa, in coordination with the operations carried out by the Iranian army against the criminal Israeli enemy." Other than that, the Houthis made to with statements of support for Iran.⁵

►Since the beginning of the Gaza Strip War, shipments of weapons which the Iranians tried to smuggle into Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen by sea have been intercepted, the most prominent being the seizure of the *al-Sharwa*, which carried 750 tons of advanced weapons. Nevertheless, the Iranians denied any involvement in transferring the weapons and accused the United States. and Israel of spreading propaganda.

The Seizure of the *al-Sharwa* and the Exposure of Smuggling Routes

►On June 27, 2025, the Yemeni National Resistance Forces (NRF), which operate in south Yemen and are backed by the West, intercepted a vessel carrying more than 750 tons of weapons and military equipment disguised as civilian goods. According to the NRF, the cargo on board was sent by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen (NRF X account, July 18, 2025). Tarek Mohammed Saleh, one of the NRF leaders, called the interception

⁴ For further information, see the December 2023 ITIC report, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/military-terrorist-activities-of-the-houthis-in-yemen-during-operation-iron-swords/>; the July 2024 report, [The Houthi Movement and the War in Yemen: Development and Significance](#); the August 2024 report, [Cooperation between the Shi'ite militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen](#); and the December 2024 report, "Houthi-Israel-United States Escalation,"

⁵ For further information, see the June 2025 ITIC report, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/resistance-axis-reactions-to-the-israel-iran-military-conflict/> and the July 2025 report, [The "Resistance Axis" and the Israel-Iran War](#)

of the shipment a "direct blow to the Revolutionary Guards' project to back the Houthis" (Tarek Mohammed Saleh's X account, July 16, 2025). The foreign ministry of the Western-backed legitimate Yemeni government called the shipment a "blatant Iranian violation" of international law and UN resolutions and only the latest in a long series of violations, including the continued arming of the Houthis and "relentless efforts to turn Yemen into a platform for threatening regional peace and security and prolonging the suffering of the Yemeni people." The foreign ministry also called on the UN Security Council to take immediate, decisive steps to deter Iran's subversive activity (foreign ministry of the legitimate Yemeni government X account, July 18, 2025).



The al-Sharwa (Resistance Forces X account, July 18, 2025)

► The American Army Central Command (CENTCOM) said the ship's cargo included hundreds of cruise missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, anti-ship missiles, advanced warheads, hundreds of UAV engines, components for air defense, radar systems and communication equipment. The instruction manuals attached to the equipment were in Persian, which indicated the presence of Iranian specialists in Yemen, and many of the systems were manufactured by a company affiliated with the Iranian ministry of defense, which is subject to American sanctions. CENTCOM Commander General Michael Kurilla⁶ said the seizure of the huge Iranian shipment showed that Iran remained the most destabilizing factor in the region. He said restricting the free flow of Iranian backing to the Houthis was critical to regional security, stability and freedom of navigation (CENTCOM X account, July 16, 2025).

⁶ Kurilla commanded CENTCOM until August 2025.



The weapons found on board the ship
(CENTCOM X account, July 16, 2025; Resistance Forces X account, July 18, 2025)

Exposing the Iran-Houthi Smuggling Network

► On August 9 and 10, 2025, the military media wing of the legitimate Yemeni government and its affiliated media outlets published recorded confessions of the seven crew members aboard the *al-Sharwa*. They revealed the existence of an extensive smuggling network managed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in cooperation with the Houthis which had existed since 2013, operating in many countries in the Middle East and Africa, including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Oman, Somalia and Djibouti (X account of the military media arm of the legitimate Yemeni government; Yemeni media, August 9–10, 2025):

◆ The crew members, including Yemenis, Indians and Somalis, said they had been recruited by the Houthis and transferred from Yemen to Iran by air from Yemen to Jordan, arrival in Lebanon (usually by air), crossing into Syria with the help of Hezbollah operatives, and from there by air to Iran. Other routes from Yemen to Iran went through Oman, Somalia, and even directly from the port of al-Salif in Houthi territory to Bandar Abbas in Iran. According to the crew members, in Iran they were transferred to Houthi facilities in Tehran and later to smaller facilities in Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf.

◆The equipment was transferred to the Houthis via three maritime smuggling routes departing from Bandar Abbas to bypass the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM), whose objective is to prevent smuggling to the Houthis: a direct route from Bandar Abbas to al-Salif Port; a route from Bandar Abbas to Bosaso in Somalia and from there to al-Salif; and a route from Bandar Abbas to Djibouti and from there to al-Salif. Four of the crew members (Amer Ahmad Yahya Masawa, Ali Ahmad Abda Qasir, Issa Ahmad Abda Qasir, and Abdallah Mohammad Maqbul Afifi) they had used two of the smuggling routes: the direct one to al-Salif and the one passing through Somalia, while the other three (Mohammad Abda Talhi, Mohammad Suleiman Mazjaji, and Ashraf Bakri Ahmad Zain Abdallah) said they had mainly used the route passing through Djibouti. Operatives from Somalia and Djibouti were also recruited to operating the smuggling network, who assisted the network's activity, including in their countries of origin.

◆Four of the crew said they had participated in smuggling operations which departed from Bandar Abbas Port and included refrigerated containers, under the supervision of Iranian experts. According to the investigation, the containers held sensitive chemical components used to manufacture missiles and explosives, such as hydrazine and liquid nitrogen, though allegedly there was also concern that components for chemical weapons had been transferred.

◆The crew said the shipment seized on June 27, 2025, was the 12th in a series of operations carried out from Iran for the Houthis, and they had used the route through Djibouti, with the weapons hidden inside shipments ostensibly containing industrial equipment, such as generators, electrical transformers and air pumps. They also reported that international forces present in the Red Sea area and the Bab al-Mandeb Straits showed no interest in intercepting the shipments on the high sea. As a result, the smugglers sailed their boats through the Bab al-Mandeb Straits at night, west of the international shipping lane, on the Eritrean side of the Horn of Africa, to avoid Yemeni Coast Guard patrols. However, the crew members claimed they believed the shipment contained civilian logistical equipment and denied knowledge of weapons or other military equipment.



Right: The crew of the al-Sharwa as documented in their confessions. Left: Smuggling routes from Bandar Abbas Port in Iran to al-Salif Port in Houthi Yemen (military media arm of the legitimate Yemeni government X account, August 9, 2025)

► The crew also provided the names of senior Houthis who participated in managing the smuggling network and maintained direct and continuous contact with elements in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah:

- ◆ Ja'far Mohammad Ahmad al-Talbi (Abu Ja'far al-Talbi), responsible for coordination in Iran with the Revolutionary Guards.



Ja'far Mohammad Ahmad al-Talbi (YouTube channel of the military media arm of the legitimate Yemeni government, August 9, 2025)

- ◆ Hussein al-Atas, responsible for recruiting smugglers on behalf of the Houthis.



**Hussein Hamid Hamza Mahsan al-Atas
(military media arm of the legitimate Yemeni government YouTube channel, August 9, 2025)**

- ◆Yahya Mohammad Hussein al-Iraqi (Yahya Jina), responsible for management and recruitment within the weapons smuggling network.
- ◆Mohammad Dharham al-Mu'ayyad (Ibrahim al-Mu'ayyad), responsible for finances of the weapons smuggling network.
- ◆Iyad Mohammad Omar Maqbul Atini, senior aide to Husayn al-Atas.



Iyad Mohammad Omar Maqbul Atini

(military media arm of the legitimate Yemeni government YouTube channel, August 9, 2025)

- ◆Faisal Ahmad Ghalib al-Hamzi, responsible for the commercial cover for the weapons smuggling operations.
- ◆Mustafa Hasan Mohammad al-Sharfi, responsible for the team translating for the Yemeni smugglers and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.



Mustafa Hasan Mohammad al-Sharfi

(military media arm of the legitimate Yemeni government YouTube channel, August 9, 2025)

Appendix 1: Interception of Iranian Weapons Shipments to the Houthis since the Start of the Gaza Strip War

► Since the Gaza Strip War began in October 2023, five attempts to smuggle weapons and other equipment to the Houthis and suspected to have been sent by Iran have been intercepted and foiled:

◆ January 11, 2024: CENTCOM announced that the US Navy had seized a vessel near the coast of Somalia and found advanced Iranian weapons, among them ballistic missile parts and cruise missiles which were en route to the Houthis. It was the first seizure of advanced weapons supplied to the Houthis by Iran since the beginning of attacks in the Red Sea in October 2023. It was further proof of Iran's violations of international law and its undermining of regional stability (CENTCOM X account, January 16, 2024). Two Navy SEALs drowned during the seizure of the ship (AP, January 31, 2024).



Seizure of the weapons shipment near Somalia (CENTCOM X account, January 16, 2024)

◆ January 28, 2024: CENTCOM announced that its forces had seized a shipment of advanced weapons on board a vessel in the Arabian Sea which was on its way from Iran to Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen. The cargo included components of ballistic missiles and UAVs, explosives, weapons and communications equipment. According to the statement, the continued supply of weapons to the Houthis directly violated international law and damaged maritime trade, and American forces were committed to working with their allies to use all legal means to counter Iran's lethal assistance in the region, including by imposing sanctions (CENTCOM X account, February 15, 2024).



Seizure of the weapons shipment in the Arabian Sea (CENTCOM X account, February 15, 2024)

◆February 12, 2025: CENTCOM reported that the Coast Guard forces of the legitimate Yemeni government had prevented the smuggling of advanced Iranian-manufactured weapons to Houthi forces. Reportedly, the interception took place when the Yemeni forces stopped a boat in the southern Red Sea that was sailing to al-Hudaydah Port, after it was suspected of having departed from Iran. The boat reportedly carried advanced weapons such as cruise missiles, jet engines for cruise missiles and UAVs, UAVs for reconnaissance, radar devices, and advanced systems for communications and jamming (CENTCOM X account of US Central Command, February 16, 2025).

◆June 27, 2025: Seizure of the *al-Sharwa*.

◆August 6, 2025: Coast Guard forces of the legitimate Yemeni government seized a vessel attempting to smuggle Iranian weapons to al-Hudaydah Port in Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen. The vessel was transferred to Aden Port, and its cargo was found to contain UAVs, jet propulsion systems and advanced command and communications equipment (CENTCOM X account, August 14, 2025).



Military equipment discovered on the vessel (CENTCOM X account, August 14, 2025)

Appendix B: Backing the Houthis from Iranian Perspective

►Despite the cooperation and coordination between Iran and the Houthis, senior Iranian officials denied that the Islamic Republic was providing military assistance to the Houthi movement and claimed it was American propaganda intended to divert attention from Israel:

◆On February 13, 2025, at a UN Security Council meeting, the American ambassador to the UN accused Iran of having continued to transfer weapon components, financial aid, training and technical assistance to the Houthis for over a decade, violating the arms embargo imposed on the Houthis by the Security Council. In response, the Iranian ambassador to the UN stated that Iran "categorically" rejected the "baseless" accusations, and which were intended to demonize Iran as part of the "maximum pressure" campaign imposed on it by the United States. He also claimed that the accusations were meant to divert criticism from what he described as the real source of instability in the region and in the world in general, the actions of Israel throughout the Middle East. He added that Iran continued to be committed to international law and to UN and Security Council resolutions (UN website, February 13, 2025).

◆After reports were published about the seizure of an Iranian shipment to the Houthis in February 2025, Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Esma'il Baqa'i denied the reports of Iranian assistance to the Houthis, claiming they were baseless and intended to create negative sentiments toward Iran. He also claimed Iran had no military presence in Yemen, and that the weapons in Yemen had nothing to do with Iran (IRNA, February 17, 2025).

◆At a press conference with the Egyptian foreign minister in Cairo, Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araqchi said Iran backed the Houthis' efforts in Yemen to support the Palestinian people and the Gaza Strip, but that did not mean Tehran was telling them what to do. He stated that the Houthis had goals and Iran hoped they would succeed in achieving them. He added that the people of Yemen wanted to support the Palestinian people and the Houthis had clearly stated that if a ceasefire were achieved in the Gaza Strip, they would stop their actions in the Red Sea (Iranian foreign ministry website, June 2, 2025).

◆After the seizure of the weapons shipment aboard the *al-Sharwa*, Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Baqa'i denied the reports of Iranian involvement. He said that

while "the Zionist regime continues killing in Gaza and the West Bank" and repeatedly violated the sovereignty of Syria and Lebanon with American backing, the American claim regarding the seizure of a weapons shipment intended for Yemen was nothing more than an attempt to divert public opinion from the central issue in the region, which was the "aggression and crimes of the Zionist regime" against the peoples of the region and from the destructive, destabilizing interventions of the United States (Iranian foreign ministry website, July 18, 2025).

◆ Ali Akbar Velayati, advisor to Iran's leader on international affairs, met with the Houthi ambassador to Tehran, Ibrahim al-Dailami, to discuss recent regional developments. Al-Dailami congratulated him on "Tehran's decisive victory over the Zionist entity and the United States which forced them to reconsider their calculations" and noted the need for more coordinated steps to confront threats. Velayati praised the "unique actions of the Yemeni people" and said they would continue "strategic cooperation on the resistance front and strengthen its coordination and unity to confront the enemy's schemes" (Tasnim, August 14, 2025).



Velayati (right) meets with the Houthi ambassador (Tasnim, August 14, 2025)