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The Houthis and the Evolution of State-Enabled Irregular Warfare: Lessons from the Red Sea for Future Strategic Military Engagement

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The renewed Houthi threats against maritime traffic in the Red Sea and the resumption of missile [attacks](#) towards Israel in early June 2026, even if they were a one-off attempt since the November ceasefire, reemphasise concerns about regional security and the safety of global commerce posed by an insurgent group utilizing typical irregular warfare tactics. Yet the most important lesson emerging from these developments extends well beyond Yemen, the Red Sea, and the Middle East.

The Houthi campaign [represents](#) one of the most

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mature contemporary examples of state-enabled irregular warfare operating below the threshold of conventional conflict. Through a combination of indigenous capabilities, external support, political narratives, economic coercion, and selective military action, the Houthi group has repeatedly generated strategic effects disproportionate to its conventional military strength. This situation further creates international pressure given that a conventional military response will probably lead to global naval overstretch since the same Western naval forces are currently needed to be close to the Hormuz Strait, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Indo-Pacific. So, to protect shipping, players in the region need powerful navies to defend huge areas. This situation is strategically draining. The challenge for military planners isn't just protecting commercial shipping or intercepting missiles and drones. The more difficult challenge is to understand how smaller actors come to wield greater influence over strategic armed conflicts without seeking conventional battlefield victory.

The Red Sea campaign suggests that future wars will not be about major military action but rather about constant disruption, economic pressure, strategic signaling, and geopolitical competition in the grey zone between peace and war. The Houthis should therefore be seen not only as a regional armed group but also as an example of the changing nature of irregular warfare.

Beyond Insurgency: The Houthis' Transformation

The [conventional](#) view of insurgencies is that they are typically militant groups that aim to topple a legitimate government, capture territory, or control the local population through military and coercive means. Although these goals are still relevant in many conflicts, the Houthi experience suggests that it has outgrown classical insurgent warfare.

The group has shown an increasing ability to [shape](#) regional and international decision-making without confronting stronger military adversaries directly. The Houthis didn't try to militarily defeat their superior opponents but to change their behavior. This distinction is [critical](#).

The Houthi information campaigns, missile strikes, drone activity, and maritime threats are not intended to achieve battlefield superiority. Rather, they are intended to produce political, economic and psychological effects that may have relevance to larger strategic [considerations](#). That is a concerning trend in asymmetrical warfare where in armed confrontations, success is usually measured less by military victory or territorial gains and more by the ability to impose costs, create uncertainty, influence perceptions and force stronger opponents to divert resources and attention. The Houthis have shown repeatedly here that a fighting group doesn't have to have a conventional capability to have strategic influence.

The Emergence of State-Enabled Irregular Warfare

The Houthi case also highlights the growing importance of state-enabled irregular warfare. Modern irregular conflicts increasingly involve relationships between state sponsors and non-state actors that blur traditional distinctions between proxy warfare, officially sponsored state partnerships, and independent action. Iran's relationship with the Houthis showcases this complexity.

While the group retains its set of local objectives and decision-making autonomy to some extent, years of strategic alignment, external support, technology transfers, training assistance, and operational experience have significantly [enhanced](#) its capabilities. The outcome is not a traditional proxy force under direct command and control, but rather a capable irregular actor operating within a broader strategic geopolitical ecosystem. This model has always presented military planners with important challenges. Reports on the Houthis' [coordination](#) with AL Shabab group in Somalia further amplify their threat to the Red Sea navigation.

State-enabled irregular actors benefit from varying degrees of deniability while maintaining access to capabilities traditionally associated with state militaries. Precision-guided weapons, long-range strike systems, advanced drones, and increasingly sophisticated intelligence support have reduced the gap between state and non-state military capabili-

ties. As a result, emerging security environments is already [presenting](#) a growing number of actors like the Houthis who are capable of generating strategic effects once reserved for nation-states. The Houthis may therefore represent less an exception than an early indicator of future conflict dynamics.

This has also been evident from the recent [warnings](#) by Iran's Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani that Bab el-Mandeb could become the next strategic maritime flashpoint. This offers a clear reminder as to the evolving relationship between state sponsors and irregular actors. The statement implicitly linked Iranian strategic objectives to the capabilities of regional proxy forces rather than to direct Iranian military action. This distinction is important as it reflects a growing model of state-enabled irregular warfare in which strategic influence is projected through networks rather than formations and where the threat of disruption can be as strategically valuable as disruption itself. For military planners, the lesson is clear: future engagements will most likely be conducted through actors capable of imposing costs on the international economy while remaining below the threshold of conventional interstate conflict.

It is worth noting that during the Gaza war, the Houthis initially stated that they were going to target only Israeli-linked vessels, but they mostly attacked vessels that were not linked to Israel. Therefore, the threat of any renewed attacks by the Houthis will have a significantly negative effect on Red Sea traffic. On a regional scale, different states would bear the greatest costs of the resumption of the Houthi Red Sea campaign, including Egypt, which [lost](#) almost 70% of its Suez revenue because of the Houthis' disruption to Red Sea navigation during CY2024/2025. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia would be at risk given that after the Hormuz crisis, currently one of its main routes of oil exports are via the pipeline to the Red Sea port of Yanbu.

The Houthi Campaign as an Irregular Warfare Campaign

One of the analytical mistakes is viewing Houthi military actions as isolated events rather than components of a [broader](#) conflict campaign. From

the perspective of irregular warfare, the Red Sea campaign is an instance of integration of political, economic, military, and informational instruments toward strategic ends.

In this respect, military actions by the group generate operational disruption and attract international attention. Political messaging frames those actions within a broader set of regional narratives that amplify notions of resistance, sovereignty and challenging perceived external intervention. On the other hand, economic impacts add further pressure to governments, commercial operators and international stakeholders. Information operations then amplify the perception of influence and relevance. Each component reinforces the others.

A missile launch that causes limited physical damage may still achieve strategic value if it generates political attention, economic uncertainty, or media visibility that are more than enough to create regional and international economic disruption. Similarly, a threat against maritime traffic may influence shipping behavior even without successful attacks. This further implies that an unsuccessful maritime attack by the Houthis is enough to serve their objective of creating security uncertainty that would ultimately lead to full [disruption](#) of the Red Sea shipping routes.

The campaign thus illustrates a fundamental principle of irregular warfare: an act may be of greater strategic importance than its tactical outcome. This is especially applicable in today's environment of information, perception and economic disruption that feed geopolitical tensions.

Strategic Harassment and Competition Below the Threshold of War

The Red Sea campaign also underlines the increasing importance of conflicts short of conventional warfare. Traditional military planning tends to focus on major combat operations and large-scale war. But many adversary actors want to pursue strategic objectives without triggering the sort of escalation that would produce overwhelming military responses that would also be backed by the international

community. The Houthis exemplify this approach. Their actions seek to create persistent [disruption](#) while avoiding direct conventional confrontation with significantly stronger Western military powers. This form of strategic harassment typically operates in the gray zone between peace and war. Its objective is not victory in the traditional military sense. Rather, it seeks to shape behavior through uncertainty and raising cumulative costs.

Accordingly, the implications extend far beyond Yemen. Future actions by the Houthi will increasingly employ such approaches against maritime infrastructure, logistics networks, supply chains, energy systems, digital infrastructure, and strategic chokepoints. Military planners should therefore view the Red Sea not simply as a regional security challenge but as a laboratory for understanding future strategic engagement and countering a group like the Houthis in such a geopolitically tense zone.

Why Superior Militaries Continue to Struggle

The persistence of the Houthi challenge presents a recurring feature of irregular warfare where military superiority alone does not always guarantee strategic success. Several factors contribute to this reality.

The first factor is cost asymmetry. Relatively inexpensive systems such as locally assembled drones can force defenders to employ highly sophisticated and expensive responses. Over time, the economic burden often favors the disruptor rather than the defender. The second factor is adaptability. Irregular actors like the Houthis typically possess organizational flexibility that allows them to exploit vulnerabilities, modify tactics, and adjust operational methods faster than many conventional army institutions. The third factor is political asymmetry. On one hand, state militaries operate within legal, diplomatic, international frameworks and political considerations that often limit operational options. On the other hand, irregular actors frequently exploit these constraints while facing fewer restrictions themselves. Finally, irregular actors often define success differently. Where conventional militaries typically seek decisive outcomes, irregular actors frequently prioritize endurance. Simply remaining operational

and regionally relevant constitutes success. In this regard, the Houthis have repeatedly demonstrated the strategic value of [persistence](#).

Implications for Military Planners

The lessons for military planners extend beyond the immediate security challenges posed in the Red Sea.

Firstly, maritime security should increasingly be viewed as a permanent component of strategic conflict orchestration rather than a temporary crisis-response mission. Secondly, defensive systems alone cannot solve irregular warfare challenges. Interceptors and naval patrols remain surely necessary but primarily address operational symptoms rather than strategic causes. Thirdly, intelligence superiority is becoming more important than platform superiority. Understanding networks, financial flows, supply chains, command relationships, and external support structures is becoming more important than ever. In this regard, the Houthis on different occasions praised their capability of operating in dispersed manners out of the Yemeni mountains with almost no reliance on communication technologies, which, hence, has made them shielded from targeting by foreign forces.

Finally, military planners need to recognize and proactively anticipate that current adversaries are evolving to a form in which they may not choose to fight a decisive battle but instead pursue long-term [campaigns](#) of attrition, disruption, and coercion with the main aim of raising the costs of the fight to their perceived opponents. Technological innovation is not enough; institutional adaptation is needed to prepare for such environments.

Implications for Irregular Warfare Strategists

For irregular warfare practitioners, the Houthi experience offers equally important lessons. The first is that strategic influence can be achieved without conventional military parity. The second is that integrated campaigns are more effective than isolated military actions. The Houthis demonstrate a clear

example of how political narratives, maritime-economic pressure, and military activity generate greater effects when synchronized.

The third is that endurance remains a strategic advantage. Conventional military institutions remain oriented toward decisive outcomes and measurable victories over a specific period. However, irregular actors frequently focus instead on persistence, adaptation, and cumulative effects. Finally, the Houthi case demonstrates the growing utility of strategic disruption as a conflict tool. Being a typical irregular threat actor, the Houthis may increasingly target maritime systems rather than forces, and perceptions rather than physical destruction.

Countering State-Enabled Irregular Warfare

The most important question for policymakers is not how to respond to individual attacks but how to counter the broader model of state-enabled irregular warfare. The answer is unlikely to be found through military force alone. Effective responses will require a combination of approaches.

Counter-network [operations](#) should continue to identify and disrupt logistical, financial, technological, and operational support networks. Further strengthening of regional partnerships with Middle Eastern and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries with the aim to enhance intelligence operations, intelligence sharing, maritime domain awareness, and coordinated responses is also crucial. In parallel, information operations should challenge adversary narratives and reduce the strategic value derived from symbolic attacks. Most importantly, policymakers must avoid allowing irregular actors such as the Houthis to dictate the terms of the conflict; thus, the objective should not merely be intercepting threats but reducing the effectiveness of the broader Houthi engagement itself.

Conclusion

The Houthis are already among the most notable contemporary examples of state-backed irregular

warfare groups. Their year-long campaign in 2025 illustrates how insurgent actors can harness external assistance, emerging yet relatively easy to assemble technologies, political narratives, and economic vulnerabilities to generate strategic effects far beyond their traditional military capacity.

History has repeatedly shown that commercial shipping can be threatened by non-state actors. But the most important challenge is that modern irregular warfare is increasingly focused on shaping behavior rather than battlefield victory.

Military planners face the challenge of adapting conventional armies and military institutions designed for decisive warfare to an era increasingly characterized by persistent disruption, strategic harassment, and symbolic attacks short of full-scale war. For irregular warfare strategists, the Red Sea provides an invaluable preview of how future conflicts will unfold and how they are tied to other geopolitical considerations. In this respect, the Houthis are not simply a regional security challenge. They represent an early model of the state-enabled irregular actor that will possibly shape strategic combat operations in the near term unless a different and comprehensive approach is utilized to fully degrade their capability to launch missiles or drones, whether at commercial vessels or regional nations perceived by the group as U.S. allies.

The effect of the Houthi attacks and carefully [calibrated](#) actions extends far beyond Yemen and the Red Sea. That said, when Iranian officials mention Bab el-Mandeb along with the Strait of Hormuz in public, they are not just making maritime threats. They are also signaling an increasingly important factor in contemporary conflicts, and it is the ability of states to shape regional security environments through networks of capable irregular actors. This can also influence negotiations on an international level and allows Iran to appear with extra leverage over the region. Therefore, the future of irregular warfare will be defined less by insurgencies seeking territorial control and more by state-enabled actors capable of generating strategic effects across critical economic, informational, and maritime systems. The Red Sea represents one of the earliest mature examples of this emerging model.