

2024—YEAR OF CHALLENGES: THE HOUTHIS AND THE MIDDLE EAST

“They [the Houthis] declare themselves to be part of the Iranian-led “axis of resistance” against Israel, the US, and the wider West—along with armed groups such as Hamas and Lebanon’s Hezbollah movement.”

BBC¹

“A military response to Houthi attacks may have symbolic value for Western nations and may curb certain Houthi capabilities but will have limited overall impact. They could even make things worse.”

International Crisis Group²

Last week the producer of the *McFiles* nationwide podcast asked me if I would come on the show and talk about the Houthis and the situation in the Middle East as we enter 2024. His request followed news of U.S. aircraft hitting Houthi assets in the Yemeni capital of Sana’a and the port city of Hodeida.

Since then, there have been additional airstrikes (to date four such airstrikes), continued Houthi missile attacks on shipping in the Red Sea (with many major shipping companies now taking the safer but more costly and time-consuming route around Africa’s Cape Horn), Iranian missile strikes against groups in Pakistan, Iraq and Syria, (and more recently Pakistani air strikes in Iran), revamped Israeli military operations in Gaza, more Hezbollah attacks, and two U.S. Navy SEALs lost in a mission to interdict Iranian weapons bound for the Houthis.

The contagion in the Middle East appears to be spreading. In an excellent article this morning in the *New Yorker* magazine by Robin Wright, “How Ten Middle East Conflicts Are Converging into One Big

¹ “Who are the Houthis and why are they attacking Red Sea ships?,” *BBC*, Jan. 15, 2024.

² “What Next After U.S. and U.K. Strikes on the Houthis?” *International Crisis Group* (Q&A), Jn. 13, 2024.

War,” the writer asserts that the U.S. is becoming increasingly enmeshed in regional wars among several disparate players.³

Therein lies the danger.

So, I thought I’d share with you what I told Christopher McDonald and his *McFiles* listeners.

To begin with, in several areas, I think 2024 will be a tumultuous year. As we are now seeing, that is certainly true in the geostrategic realm. There are, it seems to me, many reasons for that but let me suggest three biggies: first, weak and ineffective American political leadership (across several administrations); secondly, an absence of long-standing U.S. foreign policy goals; and, finally, a bitterly divided domestic front that has resulted in America’s receding influence around the globe, a hollowing out of our military, and uncertainty as to what future role—if any—our country should play as a Great Power. (In *Time* magazine’s latest “Risk Report” for 2024, I noted with interest that the top risk category listed was “The U.S. vs. Itself”).⁴ How true!

Our enemies see the same dynamic unfolding and are moving to take advantage of it.

Welcome to 2024!

This missive is the first in a series of articles about what this coming year holds for each of us. One doesn’t need a crystal ball to see much of what is coming—more natural disasters, a controversial U.S. presidential election, rising tensions in the Middle East, bank failures, rising prices at the grocery store and at the gas pump, a Russian-Ukrainian war entering its third year, new COVID variants and new vaccinations to capitalize on the fears, shrinking populations, new levels of Chinese geopolitical aggressiveness, and a church steadily giving ground to compromise, the value of life, and woke madness.

When I was a visiting professor at the College of the Ozarks, I would often try to gauge my students’ knowledge of world events by having them list—and describe—the world’s five trouble spots at the time (those places around the world which were most dangerous in terms

³ Robin Wright, “How Ten Middle East Conflicts Are Converging into One Big War,” *The New Yorker*, Jan. 17, 2024.

⁴ Ian Bremmer, “The View: The Top Risks of 2024.” *TIME*, Jan. 2024.

of potential to spark a worldwide conflict). If I would list them today: the danger of a metastasizing conflict in the Middle East (the Gaza chaos is now over 100 days old); the Russo-Ukrainian conflict (now ready to enter its third year); Chinese tensions in East Asia and the South China Sea (Taiwan recently snubbed Beijing by electing Lai-Ching-te, a candidate whom Beijing's leaders had previously labeled as a troublemaker); the Korean peninsula (recent artillery exchanges along the border); and, civil war, lawlessness, and societal breakdowns in South America.

During the podcast, I mentioned that dangerous times in the Middle East are likely to accelerate from 2024 onward. Among the many explanations for this phenomenon is that all three major religions in the area—Muslims, Jews, and Christians—are looking forward to a coming messiah during an end-time characterized by war, increasing chaos, and lawlessness. For the Muslims (particularly Shi'ite believers) this apocalyptic figure is the "Mahdi," literally the "Guided One," who is not mentioned in the Qur'an but figures prominently in several *hadith* (canonical compilations). At the same time, the Jewish faithful are waiting for a Messiah to restore the kingdom of David as prophesized in the Old Testament. Finally, the Christians—who believe that Jesus Christ completely fulfilled the prophets and the requirements of the Law—anticipate the imminent Second Coming of Christ.

Lest I stray too far afield, let me get back to the events of the last few days in the Middle East. The latest ratcheting-up of military activities in the region began, of course, with the Hamas butchery in Israel (now over 100 days ago) and the retaliatory Israeli strikes in Gaza. In mid-November, justifying their actions as resistance against Israeli moves in Gaza and allegedly in sympathy with the Palestinian cause, the Houthis—an Iranian proxy group—began hitting shipping targets in the Red Sea with missile and drone attacks. Biden's national security team began planning a response (at the time, Biden was vacationing in the Caribbean, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, unbeknownst to the administration, was missing in action, and Austin's Number 2 at DoD was vacationing in Puerto Rico), so the decision was made to give diplomacy one more chance. A final appeal was sent to the Houthis

through friendly channels. The next day, the Houthis responded with their largest barrage of missile and drone attacks to date.

A total rebuff to Washington.

Last week, in response to continued Houthi attacks on shipping, U.S. aircraft from the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Eisenhower* launched some 70 strikes on 16 Houthi sites in Yemen in response to repeated attacks by the Iranian proxy group on shipping in the Red Sea. The American strikes included a handful of British land-based aircraft in Cyprus and tomahawk missiles from the *U.S.S. Florida* submarine.

The strikes were designed to attain two objectives: inflict just enough damage to dissuade the proxy group from targeting shipping in the Red Sea, and select targets designed to minimize civilian casualties. Only the United States military operates within such constraints (or friendly militaries upon whom we can place financial leverage, *i.e.*, the Israeli Defense Forces).

Our enemies have no such constraints.

In one sense, that's what differentiates them from us.

What was the immediate response to the first wave of airstrikes? The next day, there was a huge rally in the Yemeni capital city of Sanaa featuring a key Houthi figure, Mohammad Ali Al-Houthi, who vowed to expand the attacks.

“Sigh.”

Why did we hit the Houthis?

And who are they?

The Houthis are a Shi'ite tribal movement that morphed from a religious school into a religious military ideology that emerged in the 1990's to revive culture and faith, very similar to the path taken by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Now funded by the mullahs in Iran, (and part of the so-called “Axis of Resistance”), the Houthis account for about one-third of the thirty-five million people in Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country located at the tip of the Arabian Peninsula. The Houthis also now control a large swath of northwest Yemen, and during a protracted insurgency took control of Sana'a (the capital) in 2014. The next year, a Saudi-led coalition, facilitated by U.S. intelligence and weapons' assistance, launched a naval blockade and more than 25,000

airstrikes on the Houthis. During the fighting hundreds of thousands of people have died, more than four million were displaced, and 21 million are dependent on humanitarian aid to survive—the worst humanitarian crisis in the world—until Gaza. The U.S. State Department designed the group as a foreign terrorist organization until February 2021, when the Biden administration rescinded the terrorist label. The move was apparently designed to placate Iran and facilitate humanitarian efforts. (I read an account today that the State Department is reconsidering its designation).

“Sigh.”

At any rate, the group of radicals we now call the Houthis were originally called Ansar Allah (literally Partisans of God), but now bear the name of their most prominent leader, (and martyr) Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi (1959-2004).⁵ Al-Houthi was inspired by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, drew the group closer to Tehran, protested the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and was assassinated by government forces in 2004. The Houthis’ founding slogan was “God is the greatest, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory to Islam.”⁶

Neither their ideology, nor the hatred fueling it, has changed.

In terms of their religious outlook, the Houthis belong to the Zaydi (Zaidi) offshoot of Shi’ite Islam—about 40 percent of the Yemeni population—and are also known as “Fivers.” The distinction between Zaydism and Twelver Shi’a (the predominate sect in Iran) means that the Zaydis do not fall under the religious patronage of Iran, nor do they have the same cultural and spiritual links as some Shi’a communities elsewhere, Hezbollah in Lebanon for example. The recent Houthi reliance on Iran’s weaponry, for example, is more a matter of convenience than spiritual subservience; the Houthis appear to retain full autonomy of action.

⁵ In many ways, today’s Zaydi extremists continue to operate under Al-Houthi’s shadow. A huge bounty was placed on his head by Yemeni Interior Police after hundreds of his followers protesting at the Grand Mosque in Sana’a in mid-2004. He was subsequently assassinated, along with 20 of his aides, in September 2004, and was buried in Sana’a’s central prison to prevent his grave from becoming a shrine for the Zaydis. After the rebellion forced the government to step down in 2012, his remains were turned over to his family as a goodwill gesture. In early June 2013, tens of thousands of Zaydis attended the reburial of his remains in Sa’dah, a Zaydi rebel stronghold.

⁶ Wright, “How Ten Middle East Conflicts.”

Shi'ite Muslims (whether Fivers or Twelvers) are, in turn, a minority in the Islamic world where some 80 percent of Muslims worldwide are Sunni. Although there are several differences between the two main branches of Islam, the primary difference is that Shi'ites believe Muslims should be ruled only by true descendants of the Prophet Mohammad, or "imams,"⁷ whereas Sunni Muslims⁸ believe that the Prophet did not explicitly declare a successor. Shi'ite Muslims are the majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain, with significant minorities in Lebanon, Kuwait, Turkey, and India. They are also a minority in Yemen, where successive imams guided the Zaydi Shi'ites for over 1,000 years (ending with the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962).

More important to our discussion here, the Houthis are generally lumped together as part of a network spawned by Iran, consisting of Shi'ite militias and insurgent groups throughout the Middle East, the so-called "Axis of Resistance." This collective network, as seen by Western experts, includes major movements in four countries and cells in others. Since the Israeli incursion into Gaza, these groups have launched almost 80 attacks on the 900 U.S. forces still in Syria, and more than 50 strikes on the 2500 Americans remaining in Iraq. These militia groups, including the Houthis, have been around for two generations and are battle tested, often field their own weapons, and are growing in capabilities and lethality. They have all vowed to continue attacks on Israel and the U.S. for as long as the Gaza war continues.

And the end of that is nowhere in sight.

But what about the Saudis, the champions of Sunni causes in the region and sworn enemies of the Houthis (and Shi'ite Iran)? Following the original round of U.S. airstrikes on Houthi missile and drone launch sites and radar installations, Riyadh merely expressed "great concern"

⁷ Because the Imams play such a huge role in the Shi'ite Muslim world, defining their numbering and characteristics constitute two of the three main branches of Shi'ites that concern us here: the vast majority are "Twelvers" (who believe the eschatological 12th Imam, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Mahdi, is still alive and in a state of "occultation" until the end times when Allah will raise him up as the final redeemer of global Islam), and the Zaydi "Fivers" who terminate the lineage with Zaid bin Zain Al-Abideen. In many other respects, Zaydi Muslims resemble their Sunni brethren).

⁸ Sunnis are formerly known as *Ahl al-Sunna wa'l-Jama'a* or "the people of the Prophet's way and the community." The term Sunni derives from the followers of the *sunna*, which are the sayings and actions of the Prophet.

over the attacks, probably concerned that such activities would somehow jeopardize their tenuous, China-sponsored, negotiations with Tehran.

At one time, we could count on the Saudis to be the lynchpin in holding the line against Iranian aggressiveness in the region. But that was before Biden promised to make Saudi Arabia a “pariah” for its role in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, tried to pressure Saudi leaders into oil concessions, and other administration policy missteps.

Now the pigeons are coming home to roost.