



The Red Sea as A Proxy Front: Iran's Strategic Use of The Houthis and The Politics of Plausible Deniability (2023–2025)

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Abstract

The Red Sea has become one of the most strategically consequential maritime theaters in the 21st century, where regional rivalries, proxy warfare, and asymmetric operations converge to shape global economic and security outcomes. Between 2023 and 2025, this corridor became a critical arena for Iran's regional power projection through its sponsorship of Yemen's Houthi movement. During this period, 145 Houthis attacks including drone, missile and unmanned naval strikes on commercial vessels such as the Magic seas and Eternity C disrupted maritime traffic, caused a 50% decline in Suez Canal transit, and significantly raised insurance premiums.

The study adopts a qualitative case study approach, applying proxy warfare theory and drawing on official reports, open-source intelligence, and secondary literature to trace how Iranian support shapes Houthi capabilities. The findings indicate that these operations undermine energy security, threaten freedom of navigation, and compel regional and international actors to recalibrate maritime strategies.

Keywords: Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, Houthis, Iran, proxy warfare, maritime security, plausible deniability, asymmetric warfare



Introduction

The Red Sea has increasingly emerged as a militarized proxy battleground where local insurgencies intersect with global economic and strategic security (Shaul, 2023; Notteboom et al., 2024). of specific interest, Bab el-Mandab Strait has become a point of convergence between regional rivalries, non-state actors, and asymmetric warfare, and shifted maritime competition beyond the traditional considerations of maritime piracy and navigation into a hybrid war zone. Its strategic geography amplifies global significance: disruptions in this corridor affect shipping, energy markets, and international trade, making the Red Sea a site where local insurgencies can project influence far beyond their territorial base.

Starting in 2023, Houthi forces significantly stepped up their maritime operations in the Red Sea, carrying out over 145 attacks on commercial vessels. What made these assaults particularly striking was the way the Houthis increasingly relied on drones, missiles, and unmanned naval systems to execute them (Shaul, 2023; Mazzucco, 2023). Their targets were diverse: ships registered under Barbados, Palau, and China all came under attack. By striking at key chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb, they disrupted shipping routes, drove up insurance costs, and sent waves of uncertainty through the global economy (Sharp & Brudnick, 2024; Notteboom et al., 2024). In effect, a conflict that started locally transformed into one with serious international repercussions, showcasing how asymmetric maritime tactics can give non-state actors far-reaching influence. At the same time, Houthi attacks began deliberately targeting critical infrastructure, including ports and oil transit facilities, which signaled a new level of operational sophistication (Shaul, 2023; Mazzucco, 2023). These developments made it clear just how much leverage non-state actors can gain when operating in strategically sensitive maritime chokepoints.

The escalation carried on into July 2025, reaching a new operational high with attacks on the *Magic Seas* and *Eternity C*. These assaults, which employed drones, cruise missiles, ballistic projectiles, unmanned boats, and rocket-propelled grenades, caused multiple casualties and drew sharp international attention (Shaul, 2023; Mazzucco, 2023).

Such incidents illustrate the Houthis' growing ability to combine operational audacity with strategic signaling. Thereby extending local insurgency tactics into global economic and security concerns. Underlying these operational escalations is Iran's deliberate sponsorship of the Houthis. Material and technological support—including missile and drone components smuggled through Iran and Europe—enabled the Houthis to project power into the Red Sea while allowing Tehran to preserve plausible deniability (Boucek, 2011; Freeman, 2010; Mazzucco, 2023). Nevertheless, the Houthis exercise pragmatic autonomy, selectively accepting Iranian assistance while framing themselves as independent actors resisting external powers (Kendall, 2022; Rubin, 2021). This combination of empowerment, ideological framing, and strategic signaling exemplifies the modern sponsor-proxy dynamic in asymmetric warfare. Building on this dynamic, the politics of plausible deniability emerge as a central mechanism through which Iran and the Houthis manage escalation and attribution. For example, the July 7, 2025 strike on the *Eternity C* was first reported by monitoring agencies, yet the Houthis refrained from immediate claims, creating ambiguity over



responsibility (Kaptan, 2022; Mazzucco, 2023). Such ambiguity allows Iran to deny direct involvement while reaping the benefits of economic disruption, and simultaneously enables the Houthis to legitimize their actions ideologically—framing them as solidarity with Palestine or resistance to imperial powers. The interplay of asymmetric tactics, operational unpredictability, and ideological signaling has thus become a defining characteristic of the Red Sea as a proxy front. Simultaneously, nations will be required to reconsider and recalculate their maritime security tactics to counter such persistent threats (Shaul & Rodriguez-Diaz, 2023; Notteboom et al., 2024). Yet, while existing analyses focus largely on the operational disruptions and economic costs, less attention has been given to how Iran's sponsorship and the Houthis' autonomy shape the proxy dynamics in this chokepoint. It is within this context that the research pursues a sponsor-proxy approach to the study of Iranian-Houthi coordination in the Red Sea in terms of operational, political, and economic dimensions. It examines in detail how Iran has used the Houthis to extend an influence along the important maritime routes. The discussion also focuses on the implications of Houthi attacks in the year 2023-2025, namely in operation, political and economic terms. It also views the impact of plausible deniability on how proxy warfare plays out and operates in this strategic chokepoint (Settembrini, 2022; Tanchum, 2023; Voskuil et al., 2023). Collectively, the evidence suggests that the Red Sea is an essential proxy front. Iranian assistance facilitates asymmetrical warfare over shipping, and achieves strategic ambiguity through plausibly deniable assistance, and enables Iran, a relative small-actor, to influence economic and geopolitical outcomes disproportionately.

Literature Review

The Red Sea has become more of a militarized proxy battleground as local insurgencies meet with global economic and strategic security. This conversion of this maritime route into a zone of conflict indicates not only power play in the region but also the intensification of asymmetric warfare. Testimony on July 6 and 7, 2025, when Houthi military forces targeted the *Magic Seas* and the *Eternity C* using drones, cruise missile, via ballistic projectile, unmanned vessels, and rocket-propelled grenades, is ample testimony to these sophisticated capabilities that have since come to define the Red Sea arena. Such attacks were not singular incidents but form part of a large campaign that had involved no less than 145 assaults of commercial vessels since 2023. The Houthis have publicly couched such operations as being aimed at an attempt to blockade Israeli ports, especially Eilat and Haifa, and have thus transferred the local Yemeni insurgency into a transnational theatre of interest. In addition to military spheres, the repercussions of these maritime operations go past other areas of direct military effect. Houthi attacks have reduced crude oil and container traffic through the Suez Canal by more than 50 percent in 2024, which requires many ships to divert around the Cape of Good Hope leading to implications of a rise in shipping costs, increase in insurance premiums, and global supply chains. In their article devoted to the disruptions in maritime shipping and strategic chokepoints, Notteboom et al. outline these secondary effects, stressing that the Red Sea is a strategic pressure point, which can disrupt the international market and make international conflicts the subject of greater attention (Notteboom et al., 2024). Attacks



on widely disparate vessels, such as Barbados-flagged, Palau-flagged, and even Chinese owned vessels, like the Huang Pu -- show not only the unpredictability but also the audaciousness of Houthis. This indiscriminate trend implies the intentions not only to destroy the trade but also to provide a certain political framework: to present Yemen as a rising underdog that could influence the main maritime chokepoints. Simultaneously, Houthi activities also describe a calculated growth in the production of force, such as the July 2025 sinking of a Liberian-flagged cargo vessel, which led to the loss of several lives of the crew. These events can underline a greater propensity to employ mass deaths, as the Red Sea is already a ground of economic disruption and a theatre of proxy warring with global strategic overtones. As Houthi threats have evolved as scrutinized by Haul in his book *Maritime Asymmetry in the Middle East*, they have risen to include more than the simple sabotage tactics to advance to include highly coordinated and effective drone and missile attacks on tankers, ports, and even underwater structures. The Red Sea has therefore been a proving ground to Iran-sponsored asymmetric strategies combining political messaging, economic blackmail and military posturing. In addition to structural point of view, the Red Sea has the geography which enhances its strategic importance.

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean, functions as a critical chokepoint in global maritime trade. Any disruption in this narrow corridor has outsized consequences for international shipping and energy flows, creating opportunities for non-state actors like the Houthis to exert influence far beyond their territorial base. Sharp and Brudnick, in their report *Global Strategic Maritime Chokepoints*, note that the Red Sea represents a convergence of domestic insurgency and regional power competition, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia, rendering it a central node in contemporary Middle Eastern proxy warfare (Sharp, 2024). In this context, Iran's sponsorship of the Houthis illustrates a calculated strategy of projecting influence through proxy actors while minimizing direct military engagement. Prior to 2011, Iran's involvement in Yemen was considered negligible. Freeman, in *Iranian Foreign Policy and Yemen*, and Boucek, in *Proxy Actors in the Middle East*, argued that Tehran's role was largely peripheral, with local dynamics dominating the civil war (Juneau, 2016). However, post-2011 developments transformed the Houthis into a strategically significant proxy, with some scholars even describing them as surpassing Hezbollah in resilience and operational flexibility. Iran's support encompasses both material and doctrinal dimensions. Israeli strikes on Hodeidah, Al Salif, and Ras Isa have repeatedly targeted facilities used for transferring Iranian-supplied weapons and unmanned aerial systems, underscoring Tehran's material contribution. Missile components and drone technology are frequently smuggled via Europe and Iran, then reassembled locally, converting the Houthis from a militia reliant on outdated Soviet-era weaponry into a force capable of projecting power into the Red Sea and beyond.

Mazzucco, in his article "Iranian Maritime Proxy Strategies," argues that Iran deliberately calibrates this support to maximize maritime disruption at minimal cost, reflecting a broader "sponsor-proxy" strategy. Scholarly interpretations of the Iran Houthi relationship diverge sharply. Kendall (2022), in his article *Iran's Support for the Houthis: Limits and Leverage*, argues that the Houthis maintain significant autonomy, treating Iranian assistance as instrumental rather than



directive. In contrast, Rubin (2021), in his article Strategic Signaling in Proxy Warfare: The Case of Iran and its Non-State Allies, frames the Houthis as largely subordinated to Tehran's regional strategy. This debate reflects broader discussions in proxy literature: Byman (2018), in his book *The Five-Front War: Countering Global Jihad*, emphasizes sponsor dominance, whereas Mumford (2013), in his book *Proxy Warfare*, highlights the fluidity and negotiated nature of sponsor-proxy relationships. According to Mazzucco (2024), in his article *Iran and the Houthis' Asymmetric Maritime Warfare Campaign in the Red Sea*, the Houthis operational sophistication indicates some dependency on Iran, but their ideological framing and selective cooperation point to pragmatic independence. Shaul & Rodríguez-Díaz (2023), in their article *Asymmetric Maritime Threats in the Red Sea*, demonstrates that control over strategic maritime points allows non-state actors such as the Houthis to project influence far beyond their immediate territorial base. Through this coordination, Tehran is able to expand its reach along the Yemeni coastline and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, exploiting one of the worldkey maritime chokepoints without risking any direct reprisal to its forces. Moreover, Iran creates a strategy involving material support and political approval. In July 2025, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei publicly extolled the Houthis as the legitimate government of Yemen, in which he was trying to bestow international legitimacy with a clear masking of the sponsor-proxy issue. The ability of the U.S. or Saudi to engage in ceasefires after their actions allowed the Houthis to collect themselves, gather new weapons, including those supplied by Iran and Tehran can manipulate the rate of escalation. This is referred to by analysts as a knife and handshake strategy i.e. making tactical concessions when necessary but entrenching long-term influence through use of proxies. Effectively, that is the broader Iranian proxy system, and the Houthis are an example of that strategy: flexible, geographically well-positioned, and capable of inflicting costs on their foes along many avenues. What is also significant is that the Houthi-Iran coalition serves as a tool of geopolitical signaling. Rubin in *Strategic Signaling in Proxy Warfare* underscores that, the Houthis are an indigenous force in Yemen, but the fact that they are allied with Iran enables Iran to exert power into the Red Sea corridor, counter-influence Saudi influence and develop asymmetric deterrence without directly engaging in conventional warfare. This model is characteristic of a wider Iranian approach to regional policies: the use of non-state actors to gain plausible and flexible options of strategic coercion.

The politics of plausible deniability is a phenomenon that typifies this dynamic since both Iran and the Houthis can hide their direct role as they get their strategic advantages. Attacks e.g. the July 7, 2025 strike on Eternity C were first reported by the international monitoring agencies but the Houthis did not make any initial claims creating confusion in the attribution. Likewise, in January of 2024, the Houthis issued statements claiming an attack on the U.S. ship, Ocean Jazz that the United States denied ever took place, exemplifying the performative nature of signaling and unverifiable claims, which are a part of the information war.

Plausible deniability has various strategic purpose. In the case of Iran, it functions as a low-cost mechanism for destabilizing adversaries economic lifelines while shielding Tehran from direct reprisal. For the Houthis, framing operations as solidarity with Palestine or resistance against the United States offers ideological camouflage for advancing local and regional strategic goals. This



dual-layered ambiguity illustrates how non-state actors leverage identity politics alongside asymmetric means- drones, missiles, sabotage- to challenge technologically superior opponents, reinforcing the theoretical logic of sponsor-proxy relationships in hybrid warfare.

The deep-sea Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which is then a narrow but extremely significant maritime passage between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, is correlated with an even narrower and strategically highly significant passage, namely the Bosphorus, leading directly into the Black Sea. It has strategic value because it has the largest volume of international vessel traffic, which includes crude oil, liquefied natural gas and containerised freights. A disruption in this corridor creates a disruption throughout the global supply chains. In the case of the Houthis in the Red Sea, Notteboom et al., in “Maritime Shipping Disruptions and Strategic Chokepoints,” provide empirical evidence that attacks by the Houthis have led to rerouting of vessels, insurers demanding premiums, and freight costs being raised, which indicates the economic advantage that control or disruption of strategic maritime choke points provides. Therefore, the Iranian approach of allowing the Houthis to function in the Bab el-Mandeb demonstrates the strategic attack of the key points in the world trade. By keeping a consistent level of threat, Tehran and its proxy force ensures that regional and international actors modify their naval, security and logistical planning to better suit a state of conflict, which increases the political and economic costs of any local conflict. As mentioned by Shaul and Rodriguez-Diaz, in the *Asymmetric Maritime Threats in the Red Sea*, these operations do not just cause direct disruptions but chip away at perceived security of one of the most important shipping routes, which makes it question the effectiveness of current deterrence regimes in terms of international maritime regulation. It is against this background that the Iran-Houthi correlation has provoked a lot of academic discourse on the contents and effectiveness of proxy warfare in asymmetrical environments. In *Proxy Conflicts and Regional Power*, Ellery B. Settembrini describes the civil war in Yemen as an archetypical proxy conflict, and it is argued that there is ideological as well as material connection between the capital Tehran and its ally. When Rubin (2021), in his article *Strategic Signaling in Proxy Warfare: The Case of Iran and its Non-State Allies*, Characterizes the Houthis as largely subordinated to Iranian strategy, Kendall (2022), in his article *Iran’s Support for the Houthis: Limits and Leverage Pushes back*, presenting them as pragmatically independent actors leveraging foreign aid for local ends. This reflects a broader unresolved scholarly tension regarding the Houthis position: are they primarily an Iranian proxy, or a semi-autonomous insurgent group using Tehran’s support to pursue their own agenda? Likewise, Tanchum, in *Maritime Proxy Conflicts and Deterrence*, reads Houthi attacks against maritime infrastructure as a form of calibrated deterrence: a warning of ability and intention at a level that does not result in full-scale conflict. Besides, there is also a scholarship and discussion of what the asymmetric means of the contemporary proxy warfare implies. In *Asymmetric Naval Tactics*, Kaptan explains how drones and missile systems can offset traditional wartime weaknesses in order to enable non-state actors to engage and counter state-level militaries at strategic bottlenecks. Voskuil et al. in their Chapter, *Technical Assessment of Samad UAVs*, complement this with technical insight, on how Samad drones perform and how accurate they can be, and how they could be used to issue coercive signals and disrupt economies (van den Berg,



2023). The body of knowledge presented here together serves to emphasize that Iran-Houthi activities in the Red Sea are a mix of state sponsorship, asymmetric technology, and legal ambiguity to create strategic disruption at low direct incurred cost. Despite growing scholarship, several gaps remain. First, while analyses document operational incidents, few studies systematically integrate these attacks into a broader understanding of global economic impact, particularly on maritime insurance, rerouting patterns, and trade vulnerability. Second, the interplay between ideological framing and strategic signaling — such as Palestinian solidarity and anti-imperialist rhetoric — has received limited empirical attention, despite its importance for plausible deniability. Third, while the Red Sea is recognized as a critical proxy front, comparative analyses of Iranian strategy across multiple theaters remain underdeveloped.

This study positions itself within these gaps by focusing on the Red Sea as a proxy front while explicitly connecting Iran's strategic use of the Houthis to global maritime disruption, the politics of deniability, and regional asymmetric balances. The operational, political, and economic approaches are all combined in a bid to give a comprehensive picture of the way proxy warfare occurs in a strategic hot waterway. In that, it builds not just on the reviewed information but also on some original thought on the hybridity of contemporary asymmetric warfare, blending both qualitative case studies with analytical contextualization borrowing from both local and global literature.

Theoretical framework

This study employs Proxy Warfare Theory as its central analytical framework to examine Iran's strategic use of the Houthis in the Red Sea. The Proxy Warfare Theory reveals how states utilize non-event actors or armed groups in deployment of strategic agendas in a manner that political, economic and military measures to implement such operations are minimal. Core principles include plausible deniability, cost-effective power projection, and the ability to operate in contested spaces without triggering full-scale interstate conflict (Rubin, 2021; Settembrini, 2022). In essence, proxy warfare allows sponsors to extend influence through intermediaries while enabling proxies to pursue their own local or regional objectives.

In the Red Sea context, Iran's relationship with the Houthis exemplifies these theoretical concepts. Prior to 2011, Iran's role in Yemen was largely peripheral, with local dynamics dominating the civil war (Freeman, 2010; Boucek, 2011). Post-2011 developments transformed the Houthis into a strategically significant proxy. Tehran's support—material, technological, and ideological—has enabled the Houthis to project power into the Red Sea, challenge Saudi and Western influence, and disrupt global maritime trade, all while allowing Iran to maintain plausible deniability. Material assistance includes smuggling missile components, drones, and naval technology via Iran and Europe, which are locally assembled and deployed, enhancing the Houthis' operational sophistication (Mazzucco, 2023). Ideological endorsement and strategic signaling, such as public praise from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, further consolidate the proxy's legitimacy while masking direct Iranian involvement.



Proxy Warfare Theory also emphasizes the asymmetry of commitment between sponsors and proxies. While the Houthis maintain independent political and territorial goals in Yemen, their maritime operations—including attacks on commercial vessels and strategic infrastructure—align with Iran’s broader strategic agenda. This mutually beneficial relationship illustrates how sponsors can influence operational priorities without exercising complete control, providing both flexibility and resilience in an unpredictable conflict environment (Kendall, 2022; Rubin, 2021). By selectively supporting proxy operations, Iran can calibrate escalation, manage risk, and maximize strategic leverage in a high-stakes maritime theater.

A defining feature of proxy warfare is the politics of plausible deniability, which both Iran and the Houthis exploit. Such incidents as the July 2025 attacks against the *Magic Seas* and *Eternity C* show that such ambiguity in the responsibility projection can be used by Tehran to pressure its regional rivals without a direct connection to the conflict and that the Houthis position the efforts as an ideologically based resistance campaign (Kaptan, 2022; Mazzucco, 2023). Proxy Warfare Theory offers a model of explaining these forces, where asymmetric means—drones, missiles, and unmanned naval platforms all give those with less relative capability the ability to upset international supply chains, impact regional calculations of security, and enhance strategic signaling.

As much as this research is based on Proxy Warfare Theory, it also admits overlaps with realist strands of power-competition and security-maximization. Iranian support to the Houthis is both a means of indirect coercion and, a means to gain influence and shape perceptions that extend into vital maritime straits and of deterrence. The Red Sea at Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a chokepoint as well as an anti-symmetric region of conflict, and thus exemplifies how proxy relations expand local conflict to transnational issue areas (Shaul & Rodriguez-Diaz, 2023; Notteboom et al., 2024). Using the Proxy Warfare Theory, the current study pioneers an insightful study into the mechanism of operations, the strategic reasoning, and wider implications of Iran-Houthi cooperation in the Red Sea. This framework allows a targeted, geopolitically focused examination of asymmetric maritime confrontation, helping to explain the interactions between sponsorship, autonomy, and deniability thereby creating composite, sustained, and transnational effect on international trade, global maritime security, and local power balance. In sum, the Proxy Warfare Theory offers a convincing theoretical perspective and even practical guidelines on the contemporary outlines of the state-proxy relationships among key corridors, which are strategically critical.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, applying proxy warfare theory to examine the Houthi maritime campaign in the red sea (2023-2025). Data collection was based on academic literature, policy reports, and open-source intelligence (OSINT). Academic works were selected for their contributions to theories of proxy warfare, asymmetric conflict, and maritime security, while policy reports from institutions such as the congressional Research Service, INSS and the Atlantic Council were prioritized for their reliability and regional focus. OSINT, including shipping traffic data, maritime security advisories, and verified news archives, was incorporated



to capture real-time operational disruptions and evolving tactics. Source credibility was ensured through triangulation, cross-checking events and claims across multiple independent sources, and critically assessing potential bias in media-based OSINT. The analysis was conducted thematically, with data organized around key dimensions—sponsor-proxy dynamics, operational autonomy, exploitation of strategic chokepoints and plausible deniability— and then interpreted through the lens of proxy warfare theory, allowing comparison with other proxy cases such as Hezbollah. While this approach provides theoretical and empirical depth, it is limited by its reliance on secondary and open source material, which may reflect political or reporting biases: to mitigate this, findings were systematically cross-verified and situated within established analytical frameworks.

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Geopolitics of Maritime Chokepoints

The strait of Bab el-Mandeb, a strait connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, has retained its place among the most important chokepoints in the world. Its importance has intensified in the 21st century due to escalating regional tensions, great-power competition, and the rise of asymmetric maritime threats (Notteboom et al., 2022). Approximately 9–12% of global trade, including oil, LNG, food staples, and manufactured goods, passes through this corridor annually, with around 30% of Red Sea–transiting oil shipments depending on it (Kaplan, 2017; U.S. EIA, 2024). The strait’s narrow geography—just 30 km at its narrowest point—renders it especially vulnerable to unconventional threats, creating high-stakes conditions for state and non-state actors alike (Brudnick & Sharp, 2019). According to SIPRI (2024), the Red Sea has become a major flashpoint for global and regional contestation, with local, regional, and global conflict dynamics deeply intertwined. The conflict in Yemen illustrates a classic case of proxy warfare, where Iran supports a local non-state actor, the Houthis (Ansar Allah), to extend influence without direct confrontation (Byman, 2018; Mumford, 2013). Proxy warfare theory emphasizes indirect engagement, plausible deniability, and strategic leverage through local actors (Innes, 2020; Pfaff, 2019). Since 2023, the Houthis have demonstrated these principles in the maritime domain, conducting drone strikes, cruise and ballistic missile attacks, and unmanned explosive boat operations against commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea (Shaul, 2021). Notable incidents include attacks on the cargo ships *Magic Seas* and *Eternity C* in July 2025, resulting in multiple casualties and part of a broader strategy to blockade key ports such as Eilat and Haifa. Between 2023 and mid-2025, the Houthis reportedly executed 145 attacks on commercial vessels, highlighting sustained operational capability and strategic impact.

Iran’s strategic role has been central in enhancing Houthi maritime capacity. Before 2011, Iran’s involvement in Yemen was minimal (Juneau, 2016 & Boucek, 2010), but post-Arab Spring, Iran became a key sponsor in its rivalry with Saudi Arabia, providing missiles, UAVs, and possibly naval mine technology, transforming the Houthis from a militia into a capable regional strike force (Juneau, 2016; Knights, 2021). The Houthis, while maintaining a degree of operational autonomy and denying direct Iranian control, coordinate attacks aligned with Iran’s broader regional objectives, reflecting a pragmatic and hybrid proxy relationship (Kendall, 2020; Rubin, 2015).



This aligns with contemporary conceptualizations of proxy warfare, where sponsorship can take multiple forms and militias often serve overlapping interests of state and non-state actors (Innes, 2020; Pfaff, 2019). Global and regional powers have responded by reinforcing naval presence and infrastructure. China's military base in Djibouti and U.S.-led coalition patrols underscore the international recognition of Bab el-Mandeb's strategic value (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2025). Regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE have deployed patrols and established military installations to counter asymmetric threats. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (INSS, 2024) notes, "The use of maritime proxies and strategic infrastructure along chokepoints like Bab el-Mandeb aligns with Iran's broader ambition to extend influence and project asymmetric power". The Houthis maritime operation is a rectification of the principles of asymmetric warfare: to leverage comparatively low-cost, mobile and unconventional systems to threaten high value targets within a constrained body of water (Derzsi-Horvath & Gaston, 2020; Till, 2018). By taking advantage of the geography of the strait, the Houthis create uncertainty and the costs to commercial shipping without having to develop full scale naval capabilities. Implications of their activities are also indirect such as through higher piracy and diversion of international shipping routes, also showing how asymmetrical maritime behaviour has secondary effects on the broader security and economic realms (Shaul, 2021). Cases like that of the Chinese maritime militia in the South China Sea and Russian PMCs in Ukraine are analogous, with proxies and hybrid forces compensating conventional superiority by resource to equally ferocious irregular tactics (Derzsi-Horvath & Gaston 2020; Till 2018). Consequently, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait has evolved from a primarily commercial passage into a contested maritime theater, where local insurgents, state sponsors, and global powers intersect. Houthi operations, bolstered by Iranian support and shaped by asymmetric maritime warfare principles, underscore the strategic significance of this chokepoint, the vulnerabilities it presents, and its centrality to contemporary proxy conflict dynamics in the Red Sea region.

Iranian Contributions to Ansar Allah's Operational Realities

Houthi maritime operations in the Red Sea intensified significantly from 2023 reflecting both enhanced operational capabilities and strategic guidance from Iran (Shaul, 2021). Attacks on commercial and military vessels, including the *Magic Seas* and *Eternity C*, demonstrate an escalation in sophistication, utilizing drones, ballistic and cruise missiles, unmanned explosive boats, and RPG strikes (Shaul, 2021). While often framed rhetorically as expressions of solidarity with Palestinians amid the Gaza conflict, these operations serve strategic objectives: exerting pressure on regional and global adversaries while maintaining plausible deniability

(Byman, 2018; Mumford, 2013) Iran's sponsorship underpins these operations by providing advanced weaponry, technical training, intelligence sharing, and ideological support (Juneau, 2016). The Houthis retain operational autonomy, allowing them to pursue local political and territorial goals while selectively aligning with Iran's broader strategic aims—particularly to challenge U.S. and Gulf influence in the Red Sea (Kendall, 2020; Rubin, 2015). This asymmetrically autonomous relationship illustrates the proxy-sponsor dynamic in contemporary



conflicts: principals gain strategic leverage without assuming the costs and risks of direct engagement (Pfaff, 2019; Innes, 2020).

The conflict in Yemen exemplifies classical proxy warfare, where Iran leverages a non-state actor, Ansar Allah (the Houthis), to project influence and contest rivals indirectly (Byman, 2018; Mumford, 2013). The maritime dimension extends the battlefield beyond Yemen's borders into the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a strategic chokepoint through which 9–12% of global trade passes, including roughly 30% of Red Sea oil shipments (Kaplan, 2017; U.S. EIA, 2024). Disruptions in this corridor—such as Houthi attacks cutting Suez Canal traffic by over 50% in 2024—demonstrate how proxy operations produce global economic and security consequences, reflecting principles of indirect confrontation and strategic leverage (Notteboom et al., 2022; Huang, 2024). Houthi maritime operations also exemplify asymmetric warfare principles. By employing relatively low-cost, unconventional capabilities, such as small craft, missiles, and hijacking operations, they threaten high-value maritime targets without requiring conventional naval forces (Derzsi-Horváth & Gaston, 2020; Till, 2018). These tactics exploit the confined geography of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, amplifying disruption and economic ripple effects while limiting exposure to retaliation. Analogous examples include China's maritime militia in the South and East China Seas and Russian private military contractors, demonstrating the operational logic of proxy or asymmetric maritime forces (Derzsi-Horváth & Gaston, 2020; Till, 2018).

The Houthis' attacks are framed to maximize strategic ambiguity and plausible deniability. Responsibility is often blurred, with attacks not immediately claimed and rhetoric emphasizing solidarity with Palestine masking practical objectives (Rubin, 2015; Shaul, 2021). Selective targeting—e.g., attacks on Chinese-owned ships despite stated anti-Israel/anti-U.S. objectives—illustrates opportunistic, asymmetric behavior aligned with broader Iranian strategy, increasing the costs for regional and global adversaries while avoiding direct Iranian engagement (Juneau, 2016; Knights, 2021).

Proxy warfare theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding these dynamics. Modern definitions recognize both state-centric and non-state-centric perspectives, emphasizing symbiosis between principals and proxies, the use of surrogates to replace rather than augment sponsor capabilities, and the operational autonomy of non-state actors (Innes, 2020; Mumford, 2013; Pfaff, 2019). The Houthi–Iran relationship demonstrates these principles: Iran provides resources, training, and guidance, while the Houthis retain sufficient independence to pursue local objectives, resulting in a strategically effective but low-cost proxy campaign.

In sum, the Houthis' maritime campaign represents an application of asymmetric maritime proxy warfare, leveraging low-cost, mobile, and adaptable systems against high-value targets in a geographically constrained chokepoint. It combines operational innovation, strategic ambiguity, and plausible deniability to serve both local and regional objectives. By combining the evidence of operating activities and the theoretical insights with the strategic context of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the current case offers a demonstration of how the nature of modern proxy warfare can allow



a state such as Iran to project its power without risking a direct conflict (Byman, 2018; Mumford, 2013; Till, 2018).

Strategic and Geopolitical Implications of Houthi Maritime Operations

Proxy warfare has become one of the key aspects of the modern armed conflict, especially in the areas where battles are unfolding with an asymmetric character and multipolar nature. There are no uniform definitions of proxy warfare and the term has been under-analysed and under-theorised (Mumford, 2013). It has been pointed out by scholars that proxy wars can be the so-called principal-agent relations where an agent state uses a local or non-state actor to pursue a strategic goal, usually preserving plausible deniability and letting a proxy maintain some autonomy (Innes, 2018; Pfaff, 2017). In these arrangements, proxies can become autonomous, they can develop different goals and adopt opportunistic strategies as well which shows how complex the sponsor-proxy relationships can be today. Pseudo-military proxy warfare is, in its turn, defined as such use of proxies that replace, rather than supplement, the resources and capabilities of those who engage in the war on their behalf (Pfaff, 2017). Meanwhile, Innes (2018) emphasizes the symbiosis of state and non-state actors where militia or paramilitary groups may act on behalf of more than one sponsor at once.

The historical and comparative analysis outlines the trends and continuation of the proxy warfare. Cold War conflicts in Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, Afghanistan, El Salvador, and Nicaragua provide early examples of principal-agent dynamics, with state sponsorship of revolutionary movements guided by broader strategic interests (Byman, 2018). Contemporary analogs include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Russia-backed separatists in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and Chinese maritime militias in the South and East China Seas, which illustrate how state sponsors exploit non-state actors to extend influence indirectly (Derzsi-Horváth et al., 2018; Till, 2018). These examples emphasize the practical merits of proxies, e.g., low-cost leverage, deniability, and the ability to influence enemies without necessarily having to mix it up militarily.

The case of Yemen is a case study of such proxy war both on land and sea. Iran's support for Ansar Allah (Houthis) reflects a deliberate strategy to project regional power through non-state actors. While the Houthis maintain ideological and political agency, Iranian sponsorship — including missile technology, unmanned aerial systems, and logistical coordination — enhances their operational reach, particularly in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Knights, 2021; Ostovar, 2016). This partnership enables Iran to exert influence over Gulf rivals, Israel, and global maritime trade routes without committing conventional forces, reflecting classic principles of proxy strategy: indirect confrontation, strategic leverage, and plausible deniability (Byman, 2018; Mumford, 2013).

The maritime dimension of the Yemen conflict illustrates the intersection of asymmetric warfare and strategic geography. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, serves as a critical chokepoint for global trade, energy flows, and Belt and Road Initiative logistics (Kaplan, 2017; U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024). Houthi operations in this corridor — including the July 6–7, 2025 attacks on the cargo ships *Magic Seas* and *Eternity C*, and the



reported 145 attacks on commercial vessels since 2023 have caused significant disruption to shipping, highlighting how non-state actors can exploit geographic bottlenecks for strategic effect. By targeting high-value commercial vessels and critical ports such as Eilat and Haifa, the Houthis amplify Iranian influence while masking direct state involvement, demonstrating the strategic utility of plausible deniability.

The operational logic of Houthi maritime tactics aligns with broader theories of asymmetric naval conflict. Rather than attempting to control the strait via conventional naval superiority, the Houthis impose costs and uncertainty on adversaries through relatively low-cost, unconventional systems, including small craft, short-range anti-ship missiles, drones, and unmanned boats (Till, 2018). These methods mirror other asymmetric maritime strategies, such as China's maritime militias and Russian private military contractors, where mobility, adaptability, and indirect action compensate for technological or numerical inferiority (Derzsi-Horváth et al., 2018; Till, 2018). The indirect implications of such activities such as piracy proliferation and diversion of shipping lanes also show the overall destabilizing effects of proxy-led maritime combat.

Iran's strategic calculus underscores the utility of the Houthis as a maritime proxy. By providing advanced weaponry, training, and logistical support, Iran transforms a locally rooted insurgency into a capable regional strike force without exposing its forces to direct retaliation (Juneau, 2016; Knights, 2021). This arrangement allows Iran to pressure the United States, Israel, and Gulf states, manipulate shipping flows, and expand its regional influence while maintaining a narrative of limited engagement. Simultaneously, the Houthis also use the alliance in their benefit, only following Iranian preferences when it is opportune, as they are actually autonomous in their local political interests and actions (Rubin et al., 2024; Kendall, 2022). The maritime proxy can therefore easily become a tactical and strategic instrument, which will impact regional security in the absence of the traditional cost of war.

These operations have some severe geopolitical implications. Bab el-Mandeb disruptions pose a risk of 9-12 percent of total world trade (including 30 percent of oil passing through the Red Sea) and result in economic shocks that are similar to the 2021 Suez Canal blockage (Kaplan, 2017; U.S. EIA, 2024). The combination of regional instability, weak government control and multi-polar rivalry provides a permissive environment that encourages the use of proxy forces with geographic chokepoints playing a key role in the ability to attack and impede enemies. The Houthi operations also demonstrate how asymmetrical maritime operations can foster both sponsor and proxy agendas, regional power balances, and exert coercive power over a wide area in a low cost/high impact way.

Ultimately, the Houthi naval campaign is the brightest example of proxy warfare today, which has both theoretical, operational, and strategic aspects. It shows how non state actors, with the backing of state sponsors are able to generate an inordinate strategic effect, especially when they are composed of key geographic chokepoints. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait as a maritime life-line in the world presents an ideal place where asymmetric maritime operations, sponsorship, and proxy operation merge to influence the relationship between regional and international security.



Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The exploration of the Houthi maritime activity in the Red Sea between the years 2023 and 2025 provides much information about the processes of a proxy war carried out by a state, asymmetric combat strategies, and strategic geography. Such activities include the well-publicized attacks on the cargo vessels *Magic Seas* and *Eternity C* in July 2025 which demonstrate a significant increase in operational sophistication. Using drones, ballistic and cruise missiles, remotely operated explosive boats, and rocket-launched grenades, the Houthis have demonstrated the abilities to go far beyond the early rudimentary maritime harassment. This has been a boost in operational capacity that can be attributed directly to continued Iranian preference that furnishes weaponry, technical training, intelligence sharing and ideological direction. This type of support has allowed the Houthis to extend out their influence into a maritime chokepoint without conventional naval conflict (Mazzucco, 2023; Shaul, 2021).

Table 1
Summary of Houthi Maritime Operations (2023–2025)

Year	Attack	Target	Weapon/System Used	Operational Outcome	Strategic Impact
2023	Multiple attacks	Commercial vessels in Red Sea	Drones, short-range missiles, explosive boats	Disruption of shipping lanes, minor damage	Demonstrates proxy operational capability; increases regional tension
2024	Suez Canal disruption	Cargo ships transiting Suez	Unmanned boats, missile threats	50% drop in traffic, rerouting of ships	Economic impact on global trade; strategic signaling to international actors
2025	<i>Magic Seas</i>	Cargo ship	Drones, cruise and ballistic missiles, rocket-launched grenades	Ship damaged, casualties reported	Heightened operational sophistication; aligns with Iranian strategic interests
2025	<i>Eternity C</i>	Cargo ship	Drones, cruise and ballistic missiles, rocket-launched grenades	Ship damaged, casualties reported	Increased asymmetrical maritime leverage; exemplifies plausible deniability
2023–2025	Overall operations	Red Sea commercial shipping	Combination of drones, missiles, explosive boats	145 reported attacks	Sustained proxy operational capability; influence over regional maritime security

The Houthis are somewhat operationally and politically autonomous despite this sponsorship. Evidence of their assaults suggests that, although they share Iranian strategic interests--especially its attempts to curb the influence of the U.S., Israel, and the Gulf States in the Red Sea--they use autonomous judgment to decide when, what, and how individual attacks would take place. It shows



that the conflict between the providers of modern proxy warfare is not a case of unilateral control but rather exists in a complicated balance in which proxies work in the interests of their patrons but have flexibility of implementing their interests at the local political or territorial levels. This autonomy boosts the resiliency of the proxy force so that it can alter with the changing operational environments and regional dynamics without direct guidance (Kendall, 2022; Rubin, 2021).

The strategic importance of geography consequently increases the effect of Houthi activities. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a thin chokepoint that connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, where about 9 -12% of all world trade and about 30 percent of all Red Sea oil trafficking passes (U.S. EIA, 2024; Kaplan, 2017). Targeting the commercial ships and the ports, including Eilat and Haifa, the Houthis make their cost both economically and strategically disproportionately large compared to their size and resources. The use of the relatively unconventional tactics and asymmetric means is amplified by the geographically small area, proving that the interaction of unconventional tactics and actions combined with the critical maritime chokepoints create a high source of strategic leverage. This corresponds to more general hypotheses of asymmetric warfare, where agility, flexibility and not directly the size of forces affect the situation in contested areas (Derzsi-Horváth & Gaston, 2020; Till, 2018). Besides, the action scheme of selective duty and ideological contextualization reifies the tactical value of plausible deniability. The fact that the Houthis can conceal the direct role of their Iranian backer and frame attacks on the basis of ideologically-motivated resistance, i.e., a show of sympathy to Palestinians, means that Tehran can exercise influence without risking political and/or military backlash. The concepts of plausible deniability in the processes of the sponsor-proxy relationship reinforce the aspect of coercion opportunities as well as complicate the process of attribution that, in turn, influences responses at the regional and international levels (Kaptan, 2022; Mazzucco, 2023).

Such maritime operations also carry a heavy regional and global implication. Incidents like a 50 per cent drop in the volume of traffic in the Suez Canal due to Houthi attacks and the diversion of ships out of the Suez Canal route and around the Cape of Good Hope reveal the intrinsically high cost of proxy-led asymmetrical warfare. Its operational logic carries well beyond such immediate military aims, in terms of shipping rates, insurance rates, and the [strategic] plans of regional and global powers. As such, states and non-state actors, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United States, and China have taken a series of actions to enhance maritime monitoring, strengthen naval patrols, and build strategic infrastructure, all of which reflect the understanding of the immense strategic value of the Red Sea to international shipping and other forms of commerce as well as its regional security (INSS, 2024; Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2025). Combining these observations with the Theory of Proxy Warfare specifies a few distinctive dimensions. Iran is a perfect example of the cost-efficient projection of power by uninvolved participation because it enabled the main state to attain its strategic goals without involving its regular forces. Second, the fact that the Houthis achieved operational autonomy and have strategically followed partly independent goals relative to Iranian aspirations depicts the dynamic between sponsor and proxy influence and agency. Third, the ability of the third party to leverage asymmetric maritime warfare tactics with strategic geographic chokepoints increases the toll of proxy operations, whereby a



small non-state actor has the capacity to inflict asymmetrically disproportionate costs on the regional and global parties. Using ambiguity and plausible deniability, however, takes the risks out of direct attribution and escalation and allows sponsors and proxies to pursue their objectives (Pfaff, 2019; Rubin, 2021; Settembrini, 2022). Overall, the Houthi maritime campaign would have proved itself to be an extremely successful example of asymmetric proxy warfare in one of the most strategic maritime shipping routes. All these observations extend the application of proxy-driven maritime conflict, demonstrating that the state-non-state alliance in strategic corridors can be a low-cost-but-high-impact tool of geopolitical rivalry in the modern context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Red Sea was established as the high priority battlefield where proxy warfare, asymmetrical naval conflict and geopolitical dilemma intersect. The strategic application of asymmetric warfare that the Houthis launched during the period between 2023, by exploiting drone and missile attacks, and unmanned naval action, indicates high sophistication in disturbing global trade and to pursue regional strategic interests. Such operations particularly in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and strategic freight vessels highlight how a non-state actor can employ key chokeholds and cause significant levels of economic and security impacts, including the redirection of trade routes, the subsequent cost increase of its operations, and overall maritime insecurity.

The role Iran has played as a proxy of the Houthis in Yemen is a good illustration on the significance of proxy war in contemporary war. Providing material, technological, and ideological support has enabled Tehran to give a home-based militia limited autonomy in carrying out its policies while in pursuit of elevated-order regional ambitions, including countering archrivals and establishing a presence in the Red Sea corridor. The duplicity of deniability of this correlation allows both the proxy and the sponsor to influence strategy leverage devoid of the publicly facing opposition and provides a measured advancement in escalation and risk-avoidance strategy.

The Iranian-Houthis connectivity has also played augmenting the layer of strategic interest and innovation in action. The asymmetric model embraced by the Houthis by deploying the relatively inexpensive, mobile, and unconventional as an advantage, is effective in twofold approaches to exerting power by combating technologically superior forces, in addition to the indirect application of dominance. Their operations also enhance the military significance of the Straits of Bab el-Mandeb that is a marine choke point that like other strategic waterways in the world is instrumental in the facilitation of trade movement of a good proportion of the world trade on an annual basis. This utilization of this corridor once more places the Iran-Houthi axis backbone in the position of transforming localized insurgency to become a transnational tool of action facet with potentially dangerous effects on the global landscape. In sum, a circumstantial case has been made that current proxy warfare is a confluence of operational inventiveness, asymmetrical strategy, political leverage and economic subversion. The Red Sea case allows state sponsors to extend indirect power and channels of action via fairly low-cost means, and non-state proxies avenues of action that enable them to act pragmatically towards local interests in addition to the sponsors. This synthesis demonstrates the dynamics nature of the maritime warfare and how asymmetric warfare



strategies, also more defined by hybrid practices, are shaping the mechanisms of strategic competition in the chokepoints of criticality. The Red Sea is generally representative of a new paradigm of maritime proxy warfare in the context of the interaction of geography, asymmetry and the intersection of state/proxy relations. The sustained strategy value of proxy forces, the strength of low-cost asymmetry warfare and the probable vulnerability of port corridors to maritime shipping channels on political and ideological issues are all captured in the tactical and operational success of the Houthis with Iranian support. The results indicate that enduring state sponsorship, proxy freedom, exploitation of key chokepoints, and strategic ambiguity are converging factors that bring about operational results that go beyond the fields of action in conflict, shaping world trade, regional power balances, and world views on international security. What this example illustrates is that security strategists in the maritime environment, security practitioners, and regulators need to be cognizant of the multi-dimensional aspect of the modern proxy war, its operational, strategic, and economic ramifications, particularly where there are chokepoints in specific sub regions, which serve as arteries of economic viability and strategic high-ground, like in the case of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Given the evolving nature and multi- dimensional impacts of maritime proxy warfare, further research is essential to fully understand its strategic, economic and technological implications, including long-term effects on global insurance markets, the effectiveness of international maritime security policies and comparative analyses of other strategic chokepoints, such as the strait of Hormuz and the Malacca strait, Additionally , future studies could examine the technological evolution of unmanned maritime systems and their role in asymmetrical strategies

Policy Recommendations

The evidence provided by this paper highlights the geopolitical and operational dilemma that Iran-Houthi proxy axis presents in the Red Sea, especially in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. In order to deal with such multidimensional threats, policymakers and regional actors must take a combination of preventive, cooperative, and law-based actions that seek to promote maritime security, deter asymmetric attacks and global economic risks.

- **Enhance Maritime Domain Awareness and Surveillance:** Safeguarding has to be intensified in terms of the ability to detect and counter asymmetrical maritime threats. With the implementation of innovative surveillance tools such as satellite surveillance, unmanned aerial vehicles and combined maritime situational awareness networks, possible incursions of the Houthi can be detected early, and quick action can be implemented to ensure minimum downtimes in shipping channels in the region.
- **Promote Multilateral Naval Cooperation:** The joint naval patrols, training, and intelligence-sharing have been instituted by regional states (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and UAE) with international potentates (the United States, the European Union, and China) in order to deter proxy attacks. Regional maritime capacity-building will enhance resilience operations as well as ensure that international law is complied with and the threat of unilateral escalation diminished.



- **Pursue Diplomatic and Conflict-Resolution Initiatives:** The stance against the underlying factors of the Yemeni conflict is of paramount importance to a lasting security. Diplomatic outreach, humanitarian aid and economic activity can provide a disincentive to the proxies such as the Houthis to operate both in terms of frequency and magnitude of asymmetric maritime activities.
- **Implement Strategic Risk Management for Global Trade:** Shipping companies and underwaters, as well as port management, are encouraged to embrace a highly protective measure such as the preferential routing methods, detecting-real time predacious intelligence, and prioritizing contingency plans. Such actions reduce the economic and logistical effects of proxy induced destabilization and sustained global trade flows by limiting effects in strategic chokepoints.
- **Integrate Proxy Warfare Insights into Policy Design:** The understanding of the operation independence of non-state actors and the calculus of plausible deniability helps the policymakers to understand mechanisms of response adequacy. Reasonable and informed strategies prevent aggression, protect regional interests, and diminish the risks of unintended increases in levels of escalation whilst countering the asymmetric means used by proxies.
- **Strengthen Compliance with International Norms:** Counter-proxy activities must conform to the legal provisions including those embodied in the Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS) and other applicable international conventions. Laws not only contribute to legitimacy and the resulting multilateral support but also make the struggle to control of vital maritime channels credible and viable.

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