

Crisis in the Red Sea

Challenges for the World and Perspectives for Azerbaijan

Ruslan Suleymanov

In August 2024, I had the opportunity to visit Yemen. This country has been going through one of the world’s most complex conflicts for more than 10 years. More than half of the country’s population of 33 million is in dire need of humanitarian aid. Since last fall, the Yemeni rebel movement Ansar Allah, better known as the Houthis, has been carrying out attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea and launching missiles at Israel “in solidarity with Palestine.” This has affected at least 15 percent of global trade. The Red Sea crisis has also hit the Azerbaijani state oil company SOCAR, which was forced to look for alternative shipping routes.

On the other hand, the heightened risk associated with the resulting instability has further made the case for moving forward quickly with the Middle Corridor, a strategic land-based connectivity project (it includes but is not limited to a transport component) that is becoming the backbone of the Silk Road region—with Azerbaijan as the [indispensable](#) country along the Middle Corridor. A similar argument can be made regarding the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). This will be discussed below.

A Sea of Blood

The Houthis began carrying out attacks on 19 October 2023, declaring support for the Hamas terror attack launched from Gaza and solidarity with the Palestinians, targeting—according to their statements—both Israeli and Israel-bound vessels in the

Ruslan Suleymanov is a Non-Resident Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University. An independent political analyst and journalist focusing on Middle East issues, he was formerly a senior correspondent for Russia’s state news agency TASS in Cairo. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.

Red Sea. However, the Houthis have also attacked many Western ships that have no link to Israel. The situation escalated further on 31 October 2023 when the Houthis launched a direct ballistic missile attack against Israel, which was successfully thwarted; on 19 July 2024, the Houthis launched a massive drone attack on Israel, which resulted in a strong response (see below). A few days ago, the Houthis reportedly fired a hypersonic missile into the center of Tel Aviv.

In response to unanswered warnings to the Houthis to stop their attacks, the United States and the UK launched military strikes on 12 January 2024, targeting areas and launch sites under Houthi control in Yemen and shooting down Houthi-launched missiles and drones.

However, the U.S.-UK coalition's strikes have failed to produce the desired result, as Washington admits. "Well, when you say 'working,' are they stopping the Houthis? No. Are they going to continue? Yes," U.S. President Joe Biden [said](#) in response to a reporter's question in January 2024. Effectually the same formulation was employed on 8 August 2024, the Commander of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, Vice Admiral George Wyckoff, [admitted](#) that his country had failed to stop the attacks launched by the Houthis on ships in the Red Sea. "We have certainly reduced their capabilities; there is no doubt about that, but have we stopped them? No," he said.

Between November 2023 and September 2024, the Houthis have attacked more than 80 vessels. Furthermore, their capacity was not decreased. As a matter of fact, in June 2024, the Houthis carried out 16 attacks in the Red Sea, which was more than in any previous month.

Commercial vessels passing through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea handled an estimated 15 percent of global trade in 2023, including 25-30 percent of all container traffic. Since the Houthi attacks began, the number of vessels passing through the Suez Canal [has fallen](#) by 85 percent. Many large shipping companies are using alternative routes. As a result, according to one [estimate](#), the freight costs of shipping from Asia to Europe rose by nearly 300 percent between October 2023 to March 2024.

SOCAR is no exception. Since January 2024, ships carrying Azeri BTC oil from the Turkish port of Ceyhan to Asia have not gone through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. Instead, they have used the longer and more [expensive](#) route via the Cape of Good Hope that loops around the southern tip of Africa. As Trend News Agency [reported](#) in February 2024, this decision had been made by the SOCAR management.

The upsurge in violence has reinforced the Houthis' image as defenders both of Hamas (both Hamas and the Houthis are widely seen as aligned with Iran) and the Palestinian cause as well as courageous opponents of the West. The United States and its allies have failed to stem the tide of attacks or stop the group's propaganda

campaign. As Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [put it](#), the Red Sea “turns into a sea of blood.”

During my stay in Yemen, I interviewed Mohammed Al-Bukhaiti, a member of the political bureau of Ansar Allah, one of the prominent representatives of the Houthis. He informed me that Houthi attacks in the Red Sea theater “will not stop until the last Israeli soldier leaves the territory of the Gaza Strip.” At the same time, according to Al-Bukhaiti, the Houthis “welcome the stance of the Azerbaijani people but can’t share the point of view of the Azerbaijani government, which enjoys close ties with the Jewish State.” This type of distinction, which is often made by terror groups to sow divisions between a state’s officials and its citizens, does not appear to correspond to reality in the context in which he made it: as in the other Silk Road region states, there has been no public outpouring of sympathy for either the Houthis or Hamas.

Situation in Yemen: The Never-Ending War with no Winner

In addition to its external demonstration of solidarity with Hamas and the Palestinians, Ansar Allah pursues a domestic political agenda. Yemen has been embroiled in a civil war for about 10 years. The conflict is complicated by the widespread presence of foreign players, each with their own interests in Yemen.

For example, the Ansar Allah movement emerged in the early 1990s in northern Yemen and began as a small association of followers of Zaidism, a specific branch of Shia Islam. The leader of the movement, Hussein al-Houthi, advocated preserving the identity of the Zaidis and strengthening Muslim unity.

However, since the beginning of the 2000s, the emphasis in al-Houthi’s sermons shifted from purely religious to politico-religious themes. For instance, he condemned the United States and its allies for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as well as Israeli armed raids in the West Bank.

In the same year, and reportedly inspired by the Lebanon-based Hezbollah (another Shia group widely seen to be aligned with Iran), al-Houthi formulated the main slogan of Ansar Allah, which is widely used by the Houthis today: “Allah is Great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse the Jews! Victory to Islam!”

In addition to criticizing external enemies, al-Houthi stood in opposition to the Yemeni authorities, who declared war on him. In 2004, the leader of Ansar Allah was killed, and his followers were given the name Houthis.

From 2004 to 2010, the Yemeni authorities carried out major military operations against the Houthis six times, but to no avail. And when the ideological flames of the Arab Spring reached the country, the followers of Ansar Allah went far beyond their native

province of Saada on the border with Saudi Arabia. In September 2014, they captured the country's capital, Sanaa, and began advancing south.

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched a military operation titled “Decisive Storm” against the Houthis in support of the internationally recognized Yemeni authorities. It was supposed to be a broad Arab coalition, but in fact, only the United Arab Emirates supported Riyadh with troops.

The Saudi generals promised to carry out the operation “within the weeks,” but it dragged on for years. As a result, in April 2022, Riyadh was forced to make a deal with the Houthis to achieve a temporary ceasefire, which is still in effect de facto.

A year later, in March 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran, with the successful mediation of China (preceded by talks brokered by Iran and Oman), reached a [deal](#) to restore diplomatic relations and normalize ties—an event that has been [called](#) the “equivalent to the U.S.-led Abraham Accords to strengthen peace in the Middle East.” Among other things, the agreement signaled that the Saudis accepted their defeat in Yemen, whereas Tehran has been providing financial and military support to Ansar Allah for many years.

In January 2024, the Biden Administration re-designated the Ansar Allah movement as a terrorist organization, after having taken it off this list in its first few weeks in office (U.S. President Donald Trump had added Ansar Allah to a similar list in the last days of his administration).

According to [UNDP](#), Yemen is home to a rapidly growing population of 33.7 million people. Almost half are under the age of 18, and 40 percent of the population lives in urban areas. There are about 4.3 million internally displaced people (IDP) in the country due to war, natural disasters, and economic hardship. There are, in addition, about 100,000 migrants and asylum seekers from Ethiopia and Somalia. More than 2.3 million children under five years of age are acutely malnourished, including 538,000 suffering from what is termed “severe acute malnutrition.” The UN estimates that 21.6 million people needed humanitarian assistance in 2023.

What are Houthi Aims?

Against the backdrop of mounting socio-economic problems, the Houthi regime, which controls one-third of Yemen's territory and about 75 percent of the population, began to lose support.

The Gaza war that began in late 2023 became an opportunity for Ansar Allah to regain popularity and to demonstrate that the government in Sanaa that had been formed by the Houthis in August 2016 is widely backed by the Yemeni population.

Thus, mass pro-Palestinian marches in various cities in northern Yemen really did become a demonstration of popular unity around the Houthis. But, on the other hand, this is an expression of solidarity with the Palestinian cause and dissatisfaction with the actions of Israel and its Western allies.

The popularity of the Houthis in Yemen, especially in the territories they do not control (i.e., in the areas that are controlled by the internationally recognized government and other actors), has not increased. In some regions, on the contrary, Ansar Allah's actions are being criticized because it has resulted in the further suffering of the local population. It is now facing an even greater economic crisis, further isolation, and bombing runs by not only the U.S.-British coalition, but also Israel, which on 20 July 2024 struck the seaport of Hodeida in response to the Houthi drone attack on Tel Aviv the day before.

“The Houthis are only showing loud slogans and playing to the crowd. Have they stopped the war in the Gaza Strip? Or have they caused any serious damage to Israel?” asks Salem Thabet Al-Awlaki, spokesman for the Aden-based Southern Transitional Council (STC), which advocates independence for southern Yemen within its pre-1990 borders.

The Impact of the Situation in the Red Sea on Azerbaijan and its Neighbors

Tensions in the Red Sea have led to a restructuring of logistics and transport chains around the world. Against this backdrop, large connectivity projects in the Silk Road region, including two involving Azerbaijan, are of particular importance: INSTC and the Middle Corridor.

“Considering what is currently being observed in the Red Sea region, the INSTC will acquire global significance and provide the same Europe with cargo on more comfortable terms,” [pointed out](#) Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk in January 2024. Moreover, during his state visit to Azerbaijan in August 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin [emphasized](#) joint plans of Moscow and Baku for the implementation of the North-South project. “This will enable us to reach the shores of the Indian Ocean and use these routes for mutual benefit and interest,” he said.

At the moment, the Iranian side must complete the construction of its section on the Rasht-Astara railway, with a length of 162 km, to optimize the INSTC's logistically optimal western route, which flows through Azerbaijan. In May 2023, Russia and Iran [signed](#) a special agreement under which Moscow allocates an interstate loan worth 1.3 billion euros to Tehran for the implementation of the project. In June 2024, Iranian authorities [announced](#) the opening of the first section of this road (i.e., the Qazvin-Rasht rail route which connects the city of Rasht to the Caspian Sea).

It is expected that the entire Rasht-Astara railway, which connects Iran with Azerbaijan, will be built by 2027-2028. Russian authorities expect that the project could become an alternative to the Suez Canal, allowing for an end-to-end route for supplies both in transit to Europe and from Russia to the Persian Gulf and, further, to India and other countries in South Asia (including Pakistan). In this sense, as Moscow has repeatedly [emphasized](#), Azerbaijan, as a transit country, has a very important role to play. In recent meetings with both Russian and Iranian counterparts, President Ilham Aliyev has referred to this role and Azerbaijan's interest in making it happen.

“We are considering the possibility of transporting up to 15 million tons of cargo per year, with the potential to increase this to 30 million tons. This is quite feasible,” Aliyev [noted](#) at his joint press statement with Putin on 19 August 2024 in Baku. Also, he added that projects like INSTC are of exceptional importance for both Azerbaijan and Russia, “as well as for issues related to regional transport corridors and transport routes.”

At the same time, interest in the Middle Corridor, whose route necessarily passes through Azerbaijan, is rapidly growing. “There is already an increase in the number of block trains that go from China to Europe through Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. An increase in the volume of such cargo is expected in the near future,” Elmar Habibli, press secretary of the Port of Baku [said](#) in January 2024.

Various versions of this flagship connectivity project are supported by the Silk Road region's major external players, whether under the moniker “Middle Corridor” or “Belt and Road Initiative.” In terms of the details, these projects are different—and these differences are real and substantive; but conceptually, they are close enough. One major difference, which may in fact rise to the level of the conceptual, is whether it is envisioned as a transport corridor (a highway) or an economic corridor (with value-added goods and services being produced in the region itself).

As a matter of fact, the volume of cargo transportation by sea in Azerbaijan increased by 2.1 times compared to 2022. Exports increased by 48 percent and imports by 2.1-fold. In 2023, seaports handled 13,375,600 tons of cargo. Of this, 11,048,800 tons, or 82.6 percent, was transit cargo. As of January 2024, the amount of cargo remaining in the port was 463,100 tons. Along with this, in 2023, the total volume of cargo handled at the Port of Baku [reached](#) more than 7.3 million tons, an increase of 51 percent from 2020.

Azerbaijan also sees an increase in cargo transportation by rail. So, last year, in general, the volume of cargo transportation by this type of transport was 7 percent more than in 2022. The volume of exported goods increased by 12 percent and imported goods by 3 percent.

Azerbaijan and Yemen Relations

There is one additional point to make, which is that Azerbaijan-Yemen relations are not particularly well-developed, and that there may be an opportunity (and an interest) to do so.

Despite the fact that diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1992, neither country has a diplomatic mission in the other. The Azerbaijani ambassador to Riyadh is accredited as a representative of Baku in Yemen. Likewise, the Yemeni ambassador to Tehran is accredited in Azerbaijan. Moreover, there is no legal [framework](#) to shape ties between the two countries and a joint intergovernmental commission has never operated.

Although the bilateral trade turnover has not shown high figures in recent years, it certainly has a potential to increase significantly. From 2014 to 2023, trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Yemen [increased](#) by almost 1,000 percent (from \$174,000 to \$1.7 million). Even with this modest figure, Yemen ranks twelfth among the 22 Arab countries. Surprisingly, this figure is more than Azerbaijan's trade turnover in 2023 with Arab League states like Kuwait (\$656,900) and Sudan (\$46,200), both of which have embassies in Baku.

In the long term, bilateral trade between Azerbaijan and Yemen could increase due to the supply of Azerbaijani construction materials or refined petroleum products for the reconstruction work that Yemen will need after the end of its civil war. This would require proper positioning, which would in turn require setting the stage beforehand.

At the same time, Yemen has a great need to train fresh diplomatic personnel. In this regard, ADA University could play a positive role through its various professional training and executive education programs, conducted in coordination with the Azerbaijan International Development Agency (AIDA), which operates under the country's Foreign Ministry. This is especially relevant since Baku does not seem to have as strong a position in the Arab world as it could (as I [noted](#) in one of my previous IDD Analytical Policy Papers).

A modest first step could involve Yemen opening an embassy in Baku. This could open the door for Azerbaijan to be more involved in the affairs of the Red Sea region—and to do so directly, that is, without intermediaries. While supporting the opening of a Yemeni embassy in Azerbaijan would not carry much risk, the greater engagement that might result could be risky. But Azerbaijan has increasingly shown that it has the will and capacity to engage prudently in various theaters when its interests warrant such a move: its experience chairing the Non-Aligned Movement, together with its presidency of COP29, speak to this overall point. The fact that Yemen has one of the longest coastlines in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which is about 2,000 km, and that a significant amount of Azerbaijani oil is

being transported through this theater, suggests the above is worth considering. In short, given the geopolitical and geoeconomic complexities involved, Baku ought to consider the advantages of deeper engagement.

For what it's worth, several members of the Presidential Leadership Council of Yemen, which was formed in April 2022 and is the highest body of the country's internationally recognized authorities (i.e., not the Houthis), told me during my visit to the country that they are ready to increase diplomatic cooperation with Azerbaijan, including opening a Yemeni embassy in Baku.