

Houthi-Russian alliance: Strategic partnership or prelude to WWIII?

written by Elie Klutstein | 26.11.2024

Russian ships made an unusual stop in the southern Red Sea. It was late July, in the midst of the hot summer. Several individuals of Russian origin disembarked and were collected by Houthi operatives from Yemen, in boats that continued to the shores of the impoverished nation. These Russians carried suitcases and bags, though they didn't appear large enough to contain weapons or military equipment. The Russians landed in Yemen and stayed for three days.

According to intelligence and security sources, this marked a concerning development in Russia-Houthi relations: reminiscent of the Cold War, Moscow had sent "military advisers" to assist the Shiite organization in its fight against Yemen's central government. Moscow continued to deploy such advisers in the country, operating under the guise of "humanitarian aid" - exactly as Iranian advisers have done for many years.

In the past year, shortly after the outbreak of the Iron Swords war, ties between Russia and the Shiite rebels in Yemen began to strengthen. This is partly due to the convergence of interests between both sides but occurred primarily around the Kremlin's growing closeness to Iran and its regional proxy organizations in recent years. As relations between Moscow and Tehran warmed, and as Russia became increasingly dependent on Iranian support in its war in Ukraine, it also began providing various types of assistance to regional organizations.

The peak of this process between the Kremlin and the Houthis, for now, was revealed in a report published by the *Financial Times* this week: according to the report, since July, the Houthis have helped Russia recruit hundreds of Yemeni men to fight on the front in Ukraine. They were smuggled into the country through deception, after being dazzled by promises of high wages and an interesting security position.

Yemen, as we recall, is one of the poorest countries in the world. When residents were offered money, they rushed to seize the opportunity. When told they would also receive Russian citizenship, no one hesitated anymore. Their surprise must have been great upon arrival in Russia, when they were forcibly recruited into the

Russian army, dressed in uniforms, and sent to the front.

The new recruits had no prior military training. They signed contracts in a language they didn't understand, after false promises silenced their suspicions. Since Russia needs as many able-bodied soldiers as possible, these young Yemenis served as "cannon fodder," sent to traverse mine-filled forests - not knowing if their next step would be their last.

Tim Lenderking, the US special envoy for Yemen, noted that the Russians are currently discussing the transfer of advanced weapons with the Yemeni rebels, cultivating relationships through Moscow's representatives in Sanaa. According to him, the type of weapons that Russians are considering transferring to the Houthis is "concerning."

In fact, the transfer of such advanced weapons was likely prevented only at the last minute this year. In August, reports indicated that Russia had prepared a shipment of missiles and advanced equipment to Yemen but withdrew after quiet diplomatic activity by both Saudi Arabia and the United States. The ships were apparently already in the Red Sea, and the Kremlin ultimately settled for sending military advisers instead of transferring the weapons themselves.

Upon reflection, it's hardly surprising to find Russian weapons in Houthi hands. According to testimonies from IDF soldiers in the past two months, they have encountered "large and high-quality weapons caches" of Russian origin in Lebanon, which Hezbollah used effectively. These weapons include Kornet anti-tank missiles, Kalashnikov rifles, and more. Soldiers report finding weapons still wrapped in their original packaging, still covered in plastic, and hidden in Hezbollah's numerous hiding places in southern Lebanon.

If Russia assists Hezbollah in this way, why wouldn't it help other organizations affiliated with Iran's axis? Indeed, UN experts reported last November about attempts to smuggle anti-tank missiles, rifles, and other weapons to Yemen, likely manufactured in Russia.

The Deal with the "Merchant of Death"

The Houthis have received Russian support since the beginning of the war. Moscow does not condemn the ballistic missile launches from Yemen toward Israel, and on the other hand, acts decisively in the diplomatic arena against

American and British attacks on Houthi targets in Yemen, criticizing them sharply.

The Kremlin isn't satisfied with spiritual support and also works on the ground to help the Houthis. Even if Russia apparently cancelled the August shipment, it still found other ways to provide military assistance to the Shiite rebels, and apparently did transfer some weapons.

The first example is those military advisers mentioned above. Additionally, according to Western sources, the Russians ensured that the Houthis were equipped with light weapons and ammunition. One of the interesting stories in this context is the contact person who served the Russians in examining such procurement approval by the Houthis: Viktor Bout, known as the "Merchant of Death," considered the world's largest arms dealer, who served as inspiration for the infamous movie "Lord of War" starring Nicolas Cage.

Bout, who was arrested in Thailand in 2008 and extradited to the United States after lengthy delays, was sentenced to 25 years in prison after selling weapons to every possible rebel organization and dictator in Africa, Asia, and beyond. He served ten years until he was released two years ago as part of a deal between the Americans and Russians that included the release from detention of basketball star Brittney Griner. The athlete had played for several years for Russian teams until she was arrested in Moscow - on false pretenses, according to the Americans - and sentenced to nine years in prison for drug possession. As a famous and well-known personality in the United States, the negotiations for her release were intensive, and the price that included Bout's release from prison was correspondingly high.

Early this year, it was reported that Bout had "returned to business" and began mediating between the Houthis and the Russian military, including attempts to purchase advanced automatic rifles in a deal worth \$10 million. According to the report, this was a small initial deal, conducted with two Houthi officials who traveled to the Russian capital under the guise of merchants interested in purchasing vehicles and pesticides. During the conversation between the parties, the possibility of examining the purchase of anti-aircraft missiles, Kornet missiles, and more apparently arose.

According to the article then published in *The Wall Street Journal*, the weapons

shipment was supposed to arrive at the port of Hodeidah under the guise of food starting in October. This port was chosen as the destination because Russia had already sent several containers of wheat there, and it regularly serves for Iranian smuggling to Yemen. In any case, it was probably just a coincidence that the Israeli Air Force bombed the port of Hodeidah on September 29 after several Houthi attacks toward our country, hit weapons warehouses, and caused “enormous damage” in a “series of explosions that shook the city.”

Last month, another development occurred, more concerning than a shipment of light weapons: according to US reports, Russia examined the possibility of transferring geographic information to the Houthis that would allow them to effectively and accurately attack ships in the Red Sea. This included satellite information that allows identifying the location of ships at sea, and also verifying the identity of those ships. This came, among other things, in the wake of a Houthi “mishap,” in which a Russian-owned vessel passing near Yemen was hit. Later, toward the end of the month, it was reported that the information had indeed been transferred to the Houthis, after being sent first to Revolutionary Guards personnel stationed in Yemen. This information was actually used to hit ships passing through the area.

Although the result of using this information is clear, the Russian motive is not definitively known. It could be that the goal was to prevent hitting Russian ships, not the desire to attack Western vessels. Apart from that incident in May, the Houthis managed to avoid attacking Chinese and Russian ships. In March, it was reported that these two countries had reached a secret agreement with the Shiite rebels, under which the Houthis committed to allowing Chinese and Russian ships to pass safely through the Red Sea.

However, the Shiite militia lacked the technology to distinguish with complete certainty between such ships and Western vessels. If the Russians transferred such satellite information to them, they can truly avoid accidents. By the way, it can be assumed quite safely that the information was passed long before last October, since in July it was reported that Russian tankers had returned to sailing Red Sea routes, despite the danger and even though one of those identified in the area had previously been attacked by the Houthis. The conclusion from this Russian audacity in this case is that the ship operators decided to take the risk to increase their profit, despite concerns about being hit – or that they knew with certainty they would not be attacked, due to secret contacts we weren’t exposed

to. The Russians, as is known, have a proven history of success in building mechanisms to prevent friction.

Another recent development is very concerning: Iran has begun mediating between Russia and the Houthis on the possibility of transferring advanced Yakhont anti-ship missiles to them. Not only does this event emphasize the strengthening ties between Tehran and the Kremlin, but it poses a real tangible danger to ships in the Red Sea. Yakhont missiles are extremely fast and precise, and lethally effective even against naval vessels. They have a range of more than 186 miles, and the parties have already met twice to discuss the possibility of purchasing several dozen of them. We can recall how a missile of this type hit the Israeli Navy ship “Hanit” in the Second Lebanon War, leading to the deaths of four soldiers. This is no longer about light weapons, but heavy ammunition of the most lethal kind possible. Such weapons in Houthi hands are a very dangerous means.

Russia Accumulating Debts

The Iranian involvement in the connection between the Houthis and the Kremlin is not surprising, but it is concerning. In the past, Russian involvement in the Middle East could be attributed to other motives. For example, one possible motive for arming the Houthis might have been revenge against the West for how it transfers increasingly advanced weapons to Kyiv, including long-range missiles that allow Ukrainians to strike deep into Russian territory. Therefore, for instance, intelligence sources previously said they expected Russian President Vladimir Putin to choose which weapons to send to various actors in the Middle East based on what the West itself does in Ukraine. If you will, this is similar to Hezbollah’s equations: as the level of escalation rises, the other side responds with similar intensity.

But there are other reasons for Russian involvement in the Middle East: The first is that the Russians tried to cultivate regional relationships against the backdrop of the global inter-bloc struggle with the United States, thus supporting any group hostile to the US in the region. The second reason is that activity in an area like Yemen, which is not at the center of global attention, can serve the Russians to intensify the “quiet” confrontation with the US, but without fear of escalation. This is a way to increase pressure on the US and its allies, but not through direct means, rather indirectly. Another reason, of course, is the desire to increase

power and influence.

However, now it seems that something fundamental in the Russian position has changed. If in the past it seemed that the Kremlin had little to gain from a real flare-up in any conflict in the Middle East, and in the Red Sea in particular, it's not certain that this is still the Kremlin's position. Russian interests, it appears, have changed. Moscow apparently no longer cares now if the Houthis ignite a broader conflict, as long as they harm the US and its allies. More seriously, Russia has effectively brought its people into Yemen, putting them at risk of being harmed if the conflict in the country escalates. In fact, it has created a theoretical scenario where it could become one of the parties to the crisis itself.

In my view, the main change that has occurred recently is the strengthening of ties with Iran, and especially the dependence on it. The Russians rely significantly on the Iranians for continuing the war in Ukraine, receiving attack drones, ballistic missiles, and more from them. This means that Moscow now maintains reciprocal relations with Iran from a new position – it is accumulating debts toward it and needs to return favors in exchange. The relationship between the two is becoming much more complex now. This can explain, for example, the Russian willingness to launch Iranian satellites into space, sell Tehran advanced air defense systems and advanced fighter jets (and even allow them to build them in Iran itself), assistance to groups such as Hezbollah and also the Houthis – and the day may not be far when Russia might even agree to help Tehran in the nuclear field. At the current stage, the favors Moscow returns are embodied in advanced weapons being transferred to the wrong hands.

By the way, this is also true regarding the assistance the Kremlin receives from countries such as China and North Korea, which sent thousands of its soldiers to the Ukrainian front. Russia finds itself mired in the Ukrainian mud, and thus owes more and more favors to other actors in the “axis” it is sticking to. Moreover, if in the past it seemed that it was the spearhead of this axis, which includes China and Iran, among others, now it's not certain that its geopolitical situation hasn't actually turned it into a follower instead.

One thing is certain: This axis is now busy with three or four fronts of struggle against Western elements, with its various proxies cooperating together in this conflict. Thus, in the Ukraine war there are Iranian weapons, North Korean soldiers and Yemeni fighters, in Lebanon Russian and Chinese weapons stockpiles

were found, and in the Red Sea the Houthis receive assistance from Iran and Russia, as well as from Hezbollah and Iraqi militias (who themselves might be sending Russian weapons to Yemen).

The significance of Russian assistance to the Houthis is that a major power, a permanent member of the Security Council, is helping an organization disrupt maritime transit routes, contrary to international law and also to its own commercial interests. It is helping it attack American, British, and other ships. It's difficult to call this a "cold" war, and perhaps it's better to judge the situation more severely, look at reality with cold eyes and understand: World War III has already broken out before our eyes.

The change of administration in the US, alongside the fact that current President Joe Biden is now a lame duck, is being exploited by the Russians and Iranians to improve positions, ahead of the great eruption that might still await us later. As all eyes in the world are fixed on January 20, many are trying to improve positions before President Donald Trump enters the White House. From a Russian perspective, this means a more powerful offensive in Ukraine, and also improving the situation of all its allies.

One of the last arenas that hasn't yet erupted in this context is Taiwan, which stands under constant, growing Chinese threat. It's worth noting in this context the words of the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister this week: The US is strengthening its security ties with Taipei and providing it with weapons, while ignoring the "One China" principle, he declared, noting that the reason for this is that the US wants to interfere in regional affairs and provoke conflict in Asia, according to its interests. What's the connection between Russia and Taiwan, and how does the US even enter the story? The answer is that this is a war between two axes, and Taiwan is another arena that might become part of this struggle.

Israel too needs to look at this evolving reality with sober eyes. As a country that considers itself part of the Western bloc fighting Iran and its regional proxies, we need to understand that Moscow is no longer committed to those interests we once shared, and that it actively assists the Iranian ring of fire around us. In such a situation, we have no privilege to ignore the possibility that any Russian presence will necessarily aid our enemies. In fact, the Russians have largely become a hostile factor, perhaps even an adversary, that must be treated with great and increased caution. In parallel, the Kremlin must be made clear through

various channels that any continuation of military involvement in the region, direct or through assistance to the Houthis and Hezbollah, could cost it – including military actions in Syria, in a way that would undermine the Russian position there.

Certainly, Israel must not give the Russians a prize for their order-undermining activity. Under no circumstances should Moscow now be designated a role in northern arrangements and not in Gaza either. After all, if Russian weapons were found in Lebanon even before the Kremlin's forces were really there, there's no knowing what will arrive in the country when it establishes itself there as a central factor. Similarly, the Russians cannot serve as fair mediators between Israel and Iran, a country with which it has now developed particularly great dependence. The regional reality after October 7 is different, and we are operating at a heavy blood price to tilt it in our favor. We must not fall into the trap again and allow hostile elements to be part of it.

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