

# Not by air or sea: The new way Israel could take on the Houthis

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 23.09.2026

The Houthis' growing strength is no longer merely a local Yemeni problem, but an expanding regional threat with no meaningful force to restrain it. The lack of an effective response from Saudi Arabia's allies to the Houthi escalation illustrates this clearly. Within just a few months, the confrontation has evolved from tribal unrest and local fighting into a direct campaign against Saudi Arabia, including attacks on energy facilities, a maritime blockade and the seizure of strategic areas around Mokha, Mayun Island and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, all while demonstrating significant operational capabilities.

From Israel's perspective, if the Houthis consolidate their hold on the area, Iran will gain another lever of pressure against Saudi Arabia, the US and the global trade and energy system, without having to deploy its own military forces in the region. Through its proxies, the regime in Tehran could thus wield pressure from both sides of the Arabian Peninsula over two of the world's most sensitive shipping routes: the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb.

Broadly speaking, Israel has an interest in supporting actors seeking to weaken the Houthis. There is considerable logic in promoting a regional coalition comprising Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Somaliland and other partners in the Red Sea region that would coordinate its response to the Houthi threat. At this stage, however, and amid high tensions on several fronts simultaneously, direct Israeli military intervention may not be the right course. There is, however, another option: deepen intelligence assistance to Saudi Arabia through the US, strengthen regional coordination and begin preparing now for the possibility of another round of fighting against the Houthis in the future.

Israel should use the current lull in its campaign against the Houthis to develop indirect operational capabilities that would complement its air campaign. Such capabilities could add significant depth to the threat Israel poses to the Houthis and broaden its range of responses beyond strikes on infrastructure from the air and sea.

These capabilities could make it possible to strike leadership hubs, centers of

military knowledge and expertise, command-and-control systems and weapons infrastructure. Such action would make clear to the Houthis that Yemen's geographic distance from Israel does not grant them immunity from direct attacks on their capabilities and leadership structures. The Houthis themselves are developing capabilities to carry out raids against Israel. In light of one of the lessons of Oct. 7, Israel must not wait for those capabilities to mature. These threats must be taken extremely seriously, and Israel must prepare proactively and in advance to thwart them.

Israel should approach the Houthis' opponents in Yemen, including the armed forces of the internationally recognized Yemeni government, various tribes and social groups, and offer training and instruction.

The objective guiding Israeli assistance to these forces should be to undermine Houthi governance. It must be taken into account, however, that such a coalition's prospects for success depend to a large extent on reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the two most dominant players in the arena. At present, such reconciliation does not appear to be on the horizon.

Given the weakness Riyadh has displayed and its consistent refusal to move closer to Jerusalem even in Israel's hour of need, this does not appear to be a diplomatic or security opportunity for Israel. US media recently reported that Israel is providing Saudi Arabia with intelligence assistance as part of US-led regional cooperation. Even if Israel demonstrates goodwill and proves that it is an asset to Saudi Arabia, Riyadh appears to have reached a ceiling in its dealings with Israel and is likely to refuse to bring relations into the open as long as Israel refuses to move toward a diplomatic settlement that includes recognition of a Palestinian state.

In Israel, by contrast, the trend is moving in the opposite direction. There is a growing understanding that under current conditions, Israel cannot relinquish substantial security buffers on any of its fronts, Palestinian, Syrian or Lebanese. This is especially true given renewed calls, chiefly from Iran, for Israel's destruction through an overwhelming, multifront attack.

Israel must therefore act in accordance with its own security interests without making its policy dependent on a diplomatic breakthrough with Riyadh: assist

Saudi Arabia when doing so serves a shared interest, including by cultivating local forces opposed to the Houthis, while simultaneously and independently building the capabilities and partnerships needed to contain the Houthis and undermine their rule in Yemen.

Against Hezbollah, Israel has already demonstrated that sustained, focused efforts can produce significant capabilities enabling surgical operations that throw the enemy off balance. The Mossad has also demonstrated substantial operational capabilities against the Shiite terrorist organization. According to reports, local agents working for the Israeli intelligence agency planted devices that helped facilitate the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024. The conclusion is not difficult to draw: The capabilities clearly exist.

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