The West needs to send a message to the Houthis

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 02.01.2024

Over the past two months, the Houthis have disrupted navigation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, attacking Israeli-owned ships and other commercial vessels heading to Israel.

In response, on December 10 the United States announced the formation of an international naval coalition of 10 countries to counter the Houthis' ongoing aggression and restore freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. Unfortunately, the announcement not only failed to deter the Yemeni armed group but was met with a daring ultimatum: If action was taken against them, the Houthis would go as far as to attack American warships in retaliation.

Tensions escalated quickly and Iran, which has so far assisted the planning and directing of the Houthis' attacks, primarily through its spy ship, is now deeply involved in the turmoil. On December 23, Iran launched a suicide drone at a vessel affiliated with Israel in the Indian Ocean. Tehran has even threatened to block additional sea routes, including the Mediterranean.

These worrying developments call for a decisive Western response that would mark a shift from the overly cautious attitude currently held by Washington. Judging by various news reports, the recently formed naval coalition's activities are limited to patrols across the Red Sea and intelligence gathering. Assignments of this kind indicate a defensive stance, contrary to the more assertive posture necessary to suppress the unbridled militia.

Along the same lines, it is difficult to justify the feckless US containment policy that persisted even in the face of yet another Red Sea incident carried out by the Houthis as recently as December 26. According to US Central Command, the 12 drones and five missiles aimed at Israel were intercepted by the Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group with no reported injuries. Still, it remains a puzzle why President Joe Biden has not consequently ordered a harsh offensive.

While it appears that the Biden administration has been trying to avoid a direct confrontation for fear of sparking a greater conflict, failure to push back against

the continuous Houthi provocations and increasing Iranian involvement signals that such acts of aggression can go unpunished. If Iran and the Houthis don't pay a heavy price for their attempt to impose a naval blockade, not only will international trade be severely jeopardized, but so will the security of the entire region. Thus, to effectively deter both Iran and its Yemeni strategic partner, Washington must take more robust military action.

It is important to remember that Iran has been backing the Houthi rebels consistently for over a decade, exploiting the weakness of the Yemeni government and the country's crisis. By arming and training the rebel group, Tehran aims to create a pro-Iranian stronghold in northern Yemen – the area controlled by the Houthis – that would dominate the strategically critical Bab Al-Mandab straits.

Indeed, the US has long targeted Iranian operatives responsible for coordinating and facilitating assistance to the Houthis, such as Abdul Reza Shahla'i, whose assassination attempt in 2020 failed. Another such senior operative named Abu Fathima was recently reported in a research by The Washington Institute to have attended strategic meetings organized by the rebels.

In accordance with these measures, the US must redesignate the Houthis as a terrorist organization – after their prior removal from the list by President Biden in a somewhat baffling move. The sanctioning of Iranian and Yemeni individuals involved in financial aid transfers to the Houthi insurgents would be another step in the right direction.

As for Israel, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has rightly stated that Israel would be closely observing the American response to the Houthi attacks. If the US-led naval coalition proves futile, Israel will have to act on its own using targeted attacks, economic sanctions, and cyber warfare.

Israel should also designate the rebel group as terrorists and enhance its intelligence efforts regarding the Yemeni arena.

Lastly, Jerusalem will have to exact a direct price from the Iranian regime. The December 26 attack further emphasized the urgent need to destroy ballistic missile and drone facilities on Iranian territory.

Published in The Jerusalem Post, January 2, 2024