

---

The Impact of the Houthis on Red Sea Security: Beyond Maritime Disruption



Bakeel Ahmed Al Zandani

International Affairs Department, Qatar University, Qatar, [balzandani@qu.edu.qa](mailto:balzandani@qu.edu.qa)

Received date: 07/03/2026

Accepted date: 17/05/2026

Publication date: 01/07/2026

**Abstract:**

*This paper investigates Houthis' interventions in the Red Sea by reframing their maritime practices as maritime statecraft rather than random acts of piracy, terrorism, or proxy warfare. Drawing on theoretical debates around rebel governance, quasi-statehood, and sovereignty-as-practice, the study demonstrates that Houthis combine coercive diplomacy, symbolic sovereignty, economic rent-seeking, and normative claim making to construct a patchwork but meaningful maritime order. Far from being mere spoilers, they act as hybrid authorities who both disrupt and regulate one of the world's most critical trade corridors. In doing so, Houthis extend their insurgent authority into international waters, producing a contested system of governance that challenges the monopoly of state navies and transforms assumptions about security in the global commons.*

**Keywords:** Houthis; Red Sea security; maritime statecraft; rebel governance; sovereignty-as-practice; quasi-statehood; hybrid authority.

\* Corresponding author: Bakeel Ahmed Al Zandani. [balzandani@qu.edu.qa](mailto:balzandani@qu.edu.qa)

## Introduction:

*Houthis* have become central to debates about security in the Red Sea and the wider Middle East. Their actions have increasingly shaped regional maritime dynamics (Lackner, 2024). Much of the existing literature and policy commentary, however, frames their maritime behavior in reductionist terms. They are portrayed as pirates threatening global trade, terrorists undermining international security, or as mere extensions of Iran (Carlson, 2024). While these interpretations capture important dimensions of Houthi activity, they present them as either criminal or dependent on external sponsorship. This leaves a significant gap in the scholarship. Little attention was paid to the *Houthis'* self-directed approach to maritime security, how they conceptualize their role and experiment with forms of governance at sea. Studies of piracy, terrorism, or proxy warfare do not fully account for *Houthis'* hybrid practices that combine coercion with quasi-administrative functions, including taxation, port regulation, and ideological framing of their interventions (Knights, 2024). As a result, current analyses miss how *Houthi* behavior reflects both tactics of disruption and efforts to establish a durable, if contested, presence in the Red Sea.

This paper addresses that gap by introducing the concept of maritime statecraft to analyze *Houthis'* engagement in the Red Sea. In examining their military strategies, ideological claims, and economic practices, the paper repositions them as order-shaping actors rather than mere spoilers. This conceptual lens provides fresh insights into how non-state actors can redefine security orders in vital international chokepoints. The contribution of this study is twofold. First, the theoretical discussion on rebel governance and quasi-statehood advances into the maritime sphere. Second, it offers empirical analysis of the *Houthis'* evolving practices, showing how they combine coercion, symbolic sovereignty, and rent seeking in ways that affect global trade and regional stability.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section outlines the conceptual framework of maritime statecraft and situates it within broader debates on non-state authority and security governance. This is followed by an analysis of *Houthis'* maritime activities. The discussion then examines the implications of these practices for Red Sea security. The paper concludes by reflecting on the policy challenges posed by non-state actors in strategically critical maritime corridors.

## 1. Theoretical Perspectives on the Houthis and Red Sea Security:

Understanding *Houthis'* maritime role requires moving beyond narrow depictions of piracy, terrorism, or proxy warfare. The starting point is the literature on state failure and fragility. Classic approaches such as Rotberg's (2004) emphasize weak institutions, limited-service provision, and contested sovereignty as drivers of instability. From this perspective, *Houthi* interventions in the Red Sea can be read as symptoms of the Yemeni state's collapse. Nonetheless, this

interpretation is insufficient. It reduces *Houthis* to passive inheritors of failure rather than active architects of new forms of authority (Mazzucco, 2024). More recent scholarships emphasize that armed non-state actors do not merely destroy order; they create institutions, regulate populations, and provide services. (Carlson, 2024) When applied to the maritime domain, *Houthis'* practices at *Hodeida* port - regulation of shipping and fishing, and taxation of goods - are not isolated acts of predation but part of a broader effort to institutionalize governance at sea. Consequently, *Houthis* are not just disruptors but producers of order, constructing a hybrid regime that combines coercion with regulation.

Their ability to control territory on the Red Sea situates them within this quasi-state paradigm (Lavoie, 2020). Like *Hezbollah* in Lebanon or *Hamas* in Gaza, *Houthis* employ both military force and governance strategies to consolidate authority. Their maritime interventions thus constitute an extension of quasi-state practices into the global commons, creating a "patchwork sovereignty" where authority is enacted through selective coercion and partial regulation. Sovereignty here is not seen as a fixed attribute of recognized states, but as a contested practice enacted through claims, performances, and recognition. In issuing maritime warnings, taxing port activities, and framing their interventions as acts of resistance and solidarity, they send signals to both domestic and international audiences that they are the rightful guardians of Yemeni waters. These acts represent sovereignty not in its formal, juridical sense, but as a relational practice negotiated through coercion, ideology, and economic control (Alaka, 2025).

Finally, theories of structural heterogeneity and semi-peripheral statehood (Evers, 2017) help contextualize *Houthis'* rise in the global political economy. Yemen occupies a peripheral position in global trade, yet the *Bab el-Mandeb* Strait is central to international commerce (Gupta and Ganguly, 2025). *Houthis* exploits this structural contradiction: a movement based in a fragile state can leverage a globally strategic chokepoint to secure rent, legitimacy, and bargaining power (Al-Sallal, 2024). Their maritime statecraft thus reveals how actors from structurally weak contexts can punch above their weight.

Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that *Houthis* cannot be reduced to disruption alone. Instead, they should be understood as insurgents who have evolved into quasi-state actors, experimenting with maritime governance in ways that blur the line between order making and coercion. They embody this paradox: a movement that asserts itself as a maritime power, using the Red Sea as a stage for both resistance and governance.

## 2. From Landlocked Insurgency to Maritime Statecraft:

The *Houthi* movement emerged in the 1990s as a revivalist *Zaidi* grouping deeply embedded in the mountainous terrain of northern Yemen. Sa'dah province provided both a defensible sanctuary and a symbolic homeland, enabling them to

wage repeated rebellions against the central government. In this period, their politics were framed primarily through questions of religious revivalism, resistance to state marginalization, and defense of local autonomy. Their base of power was distant from the western coastline leaving little reason for analysts to consider them actors with maritime potential (Al-Sallal, 2024).

Things began to shift after they took over of Sana'a in September 2014 and expanded into western governorates. By capturing *Hodeida*, the country's most important port, they acquired a geographical position of enormous significance. This capture altered not only their tactical capacities but also their symbolic and strategic identity (Carlson, 2024). They now possess access to maritime trade routes and, more importantly, a lever in regional and global politics. The *Bab el-Mandeb* Strait, lying just south of *Hodeida*, connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean, making it indispensable for international trade. By extending their authority over Yemen's western coastline, *Houthis* redefined themselves from a localized mountain rebellion into an actor with the capacity to influence global supply chains and international security agendas (Carboni, 2025).

Possession of coastal territory led *Houthis* to portray themselves as guardians of Yemeni sovereignty that extended over both land and sea. Attacks on vessels were depicted not as piracy but as legitimate acts of protecting Yemen or as gestures of solidarity with regional causes, especially the Palestinian struggle. (Ahmad and Khawaja, 2025). Control of *Hodeida* port provides them with the ability to levy customs duties, regulate imports, and supervise the movement of goods. These practices generate essential revenue and demonstrate that they, rather than the internationally recognized government, are the effective custodians of Yemen's primary commercial gateway. Deploying naval mines, drones, and anti-ship missiles further communicates deterrence and the ability to police access to the Red Sea. Issuing public warnings to foreign ships and framing maritime incidents through official communiqués transform acts of coercion into assertions of political authority.

The strategic significance of this evolution cannot be overstated. The government remains weak, while *Houthis* exercises *de facto* control over the country's most important port and coastline. In doing so, they have blurred the line between state and non-state authority in one of the world's most sensitive maritime corridors. Asserting control over coastal Yemen has become a way of manufacturing recognition and projecting an image of authority that resonates beyond their immediate territories. This transformation also reflects a broader shift in how insurgent groups operate in the 21st century (Abdalla, 2024). Traditionally, rebel governance scholarship examined how armed groups regulate territories, extract resources, and interact with populations on land, *Houthis* extend these dynamics to the maritime domain.

Economically, this shift has been transformative for *Houthi's* war effort. The Red Sea offers lucrative opportunities for rent extraction. Smuggling networks thrive under their control of coastal routes. Illicit taxation of imports provides a steady stream of income (Carboni, 2025). Even the threat of maritime attacks has ripple effects: raising insurance premiums for international shipping, inflating global transportation costs, and indirectly embedding the *Houthis* into global trade regimes (Alsudani, 2025). The ideological framing of these interventions further enhances their significance. *Houthis* consistently situate maritime disruption within narratives of justice and resistance; solidarity with Gaza, defiance against Western imperialism, and defense of Yemeni sovereignty against Saudi-led aggression. Such normative claim transforms coercive actions into symbolic performances of legitimacy (Knights, 2024). They reinforce *Houthis'* domestic support base while amplifying their resonance across regional and global audiences sympathetic to anti-imperial struggles. Through this framing, *Houthis* seek to transcend their identity as a Yemeni insurgent group, recasting themselves as regional actors engaged in struggles over global justice (Lackner, 2024).

Ultimately, the *Houthis'* case illustrates how non-state groups can evolve to exploit geography, ideology, and global trade to expand their authority. What began as a mountain-based rebellion has become a hybrid political project that reaches into one of the world's most vital maritime corridors. In this sense, *Houthis* embody a paradox of contemporary conflict: they are at once insurgents and governors, spoilers and order-makers, disruptors and regulators. Their maritime statecraft confirms that security in the 21st century cannot be understood solely through the lens of states and navies. Instead, it must account for insurgent actors who leverage contested geographies to assert authority, shape regional orders, and influence the flows of global commerce.

### 3. Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology that integrates primary discourse analysis, secondary literature review, and comparative case reflection. Primary data were drawn from *Houthi* communiqués, speeches by movement's leaders and maritime warning notices, which were systematically collected between 2019 and 2025. These sources were analyzed to identify how *Houthis* construct claims to sovereignty, justify maritime actions, and embed coercion within practices of regulation. Media statements and satellite imagery of *Hodeida* port and surrounding coastal areas were used to triangulate official narratives with observable practices. Secondary sources such as peer-reviewed literature and investigative journalism provided empirical grounding on attacks against vessels, port control, smuggling networks, and the broader geopolitical context of the Red Sea. The analysis was guided by thematic coding, focusing on four analytical categories:

1. *Coercive diplomacy* — the use of maritime violence to gain advantage in negotiations.
2. *Symbolic sovereignty* — practices such as taxation, fishing zone regulation, and communiqués asserting guardianship of Yemeni waters.
3. *Economic rent-seeking* — revenue generation through smuggling, illicit taxation, and inflation of shipping costs.
4. *Normative claim making* — framing maritime actions as solidarity with Gaza or anti-imperialist resistance.

These themes were interpreted through the lens of several theoretical frameworks. State failure (Rotberg, 2004), which contextualizes the collapse of Yemeni state authority. Rebel governance (Duyvesteyn *et al.*, 2016), which emphasizes the institutional and regulatory practices of armed groups. Quasi-statehood (Jackson, 1990), which illuminates *Houthis'* performance of state-like functions without recognition. Sovereignty-as-practice (Khachaturian, 2021), which highlights the relational and performative enactment of authority. In addition, comparative case studies were used to broaden interpretation. Hezbollah's hybrid sovereignty, Hamas's governance of Gaza and Somali piracy. These cases highlight both similarities and differences in how non-state actors experiment with authority in fragile contexts.

In combining textual discourse analysis, comparative reflection, and theoretical framing, the study develops a conceptualization of maritime statecraft that advances beyond simplistic labels of piracy or terrorism. This methodology enables a deeper understanding of how *Houthis* transform fragility into advantage by exploiting chokepoint geographies and embedding insurgent authority into global trade networks.

#### 4. Analysis and findings:

The impact of *Houthis* on Red Sea security extends far beyond the language of disruption used to describe their actions. To understand their role, it is necessary to move away from framing them merely as spoilers or pirates and instead to examine how their activities reshape the fabric of security governance in one of the most vital maritime corridors. *Houthis'* entrance into this arena marks not just the arrival of a new disruptor but also the emergence of a non-state actor experimenting with maritime statecraft.

The first dimension of this impact lies in their hybrid authority. Unlike pirates or terrorist organizations, *Houthis* operate through a fusion of coercive tactics and quasi-administrative practices. Their control of *Hodeida* Port is emblematic. Beyond serving as a military foothold, the Port provides opportunities for taxation, customs regulation, and the management of goods entering Yemen. Similarly, their issuance of warnings to foreign ships and their regulation of local

fishing zones illustrates attempts to project authority over maritime space. By embedding coercion within practices of governance, they create a hybrid authority that challenges the traditional binaries of order versus disorder, insurgent versus state.

This hybrid authority directly contributes to a broader shift in the regional security order. Historically, the monopoly of state navies, especially those of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the USA, has defined the Red Sea's security. Multinational operations, such as Combined Task Force 151, designed to combat piracy off the Horn of Africa, reinforced the assumption that the maritime domain was an arena policed exclusively by states and international coalitions. *Houthis* have disrupted this logic. By deploying drones and anti-ship missiles and asserting regulatory practices at ports, they have carved out a space within the Red Sea security order that cannot be dismissed as temporary or peripheral. Their presence effectively creates a multi-layered sovereignty regime, in which authority is distributed unevenly among state navies, international coalitions, and an insurgent movement with local legitimacy and control of territory.

The normalization of this fragmented security regime constitutes one of the most significant long-term risks for global trade and regional stability. If *Houthis'* position as *de facto* maritime regulators persists, the Red Sea may evolve into a precedent-setting example of contested governance in critical chokepoints. Instead of a singular regime of authority, the strait would be governed through competing sovereignties: international law and coalition patrols on the one hand, and *Houthi* on the other. This normalization would signal to other insurgent groups worldwide that it is possible not only to disrupt but also to institutionalize power in strategic maritime spaces.

This new framing of impact carries several analytical implications. First, it demonstrates that *Houthis* are not merely opportunistic actors capitalizing on Yemen's instability, but strategic agents capable of shaping international security environments. Their hybrid authority reflects intentional efforts to construct legitimacy, extract rents, and perform sovereignty. Second, it shows that maritime security cannot be understood solely through the lens of naval power and international cooperation. Non-state actors now possess the capacity to engage in order making in ways that rival state practices. Finally, it illustrates how fragile states can become incubators of new forms of authority that extend beyond their borders, affecting global commons and critical infrastructure far removed from the initial conflict. *Houthis'* impact is also deeply symbolic. Their framing of maritime operations as resistance against imperial powers or as solidarity with Palestine situates them within broader ideological currents that resonate regionally and globally. This symbolic dimension amplifies the political consequences of their actions: every attack on a vessel is not only a material disruption but also a claim to moral legitimacy. By embedding their maritime strategy within discourses of

justice, anti-imperialism, and sovereignty defense, *Houthis* reposition themselves not just as a Yemeni faction, but as a regional actor contributing to the struggle against global injustice.

Comparatively, *Houthis'* role in the Red Sea differs from other non-state maritime actors such as Somali pirates. The latter primarily sought ransom payments, with little ambition to project governance or sovereignty. *Houthis*, by contrast, intertwine disruption with governance, taxation, and symbolic sovereignty, creating practices that resemble proto-state functions. They are closer in this sense to groups like *Hezbollah*, which combines military capabilities with governance of territory and provision of services.

The implications for Red Sea security are profound. Shipping companies now face a security environment in which risk is not determined solely by the capacity of state navies to protect but also by the intentions and strategies of a non-state actor entrenched on Yemen's coast. Insurance premiums have risen, supply chains are recalibrated, and naval coalitions must contend with an adversary that is both adaptive and deeply embedded in local terrain. For regional states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt, *Houthis* represent not just a military threat but also a political challenge to their monopoly over Red Sea security. For international actors like the United States, *Houthis* complicate long-standing strategies of maritime governance. Ultimately, the impact of *Houthis* on Red Sea security must be understood as transformative. They have inserted themselves into the heart of global trade routes, creating a hybrid authority that challenges state monopolies. Their practices illustrate how non-state actors can move beyond disruption to become enduring players in global security. The Red Sea, once a maritime space safeguarded by state power, now stands as a laboratory of hybrid sovereignty where an insurgent movement exercises influence on global commerce. This redefinition of security is not only a regional concern but also a global one, raising urgent questions about how the international community adapts to a world where non-state actors increasingly shape the governance of strategic spaces.

##### 5. Theoretical Reflections :

*Houthis* intervention in the Red Sea demands a rethinking of established categories in international relations, security studies, and maritime governance. Their activities cannot be captured adequately by the standard vocabulary of piracy, terrorism, or proxy warfare. Instead, they reveal the need for a more nuanced framework that treats sovereignty as practice, governance as hybrid, and maritime security as a contested space. The theoretical reflections arising from this case force departure from orthodox state-centric paradigms and require engagement with literature on rebel governance, quasi-statehood, and structural heterogeneity (Carboni, 2025).

*Rethinking Security Beyond Counter-Piracy.* The most pressing theoretical implication is the inadequacy of existing counter-piracy and counter-terror frameworks. Naval patrols, freedom-of-navigation operations, and multilateral task forces were designed to address actors whose goals are transactional (pirates seeking ransom) or symbolic (terrorists seeking spectacle). *Houthis*, by contrast, deploy violence as part of a broader repertoire of governance, legitimacy, and diplomacy (Carlson, 2024). They do not merely seek immediate profit or attention; they embed maritime coercion in a long-term project of sovereignty performance and bargaining. This demands a theoretical shift. If piracy studies view non-state violence as disorder to be suppressed, and counter-terror frameworks frame insurgents as spoilers to be eradicated, then the *Houthi* case demonstrates the rise of order-making insurgents in the maritime domain. Security studies must therefore develop a vocabulary that accounts for hybrid order production, where insurgents simultaneously disrupt and regulate.

*Rebel Governance and Quasi-Statehood at Sea.* The literature on rebel governance (Mampilly, 2011) has shown that armed groups frequently build institutions, deliver services, and regulate populations. The *Houthis'* extension of these practices into maritime space demonstrates that rebel governance is not confined to land. Ports, trade flows and fishing zones become arenas where insurgents experiment with authority. This aligns with concepts of quasi-statehood (Staniland, 2012). Like other quasi-states, *Houthis* exercise many functions of sovereignty—taxation, regulation, and enforcement—without formal international recognition (Lackner, 2024). What is new here is the extension of quasi-statehood into international commons, spaces traditionally assumed to be beyond the reach of non-state actors. *Houthis'* ability to regulate maritime trade challenges the assumption that oceans are inherently governed by states through naval coalitions. Instead, the Red Sea has become an arena of layered sovereignty. (Paes, Beales, Hinz, & Ribe, 2024).

*Sovereignty as Social Relation.* A third theoretical insight arises from the view of sovereignty as social relations (Khachaturian, 2021). Sovereignty is not merely a legal status, but a practice performed through rituals of authority, coercion, and recognition. By taxing goods at *Hodeidah*, issuing warnings to ships, and regulating fishing zones, *Houthis* enact sovereignty in everyday practices. These acts project authority not just domestically but internationally, signaling that they are the guardians of Yemeni waters. This performative sovereignty reveals how authority can be fragmented and contested yet still real in its effects. Thus, *Houthis* highlight sovereignty as a process rather than possession, contested but effective in shaping security outcomes (Carboni, 2025).

*Structural Heterogeneity and Chokepoint Leverage.* Finally, *Houthis'* maritime role can be situated within theories of structural heterogeneity (Evers, 2017) and semi-peripheral statehood (Agar, 2022). Yemen is globally peripheral in

terms of economic development, yet geographically central because of its location on the *Bab el-Mandeb* Strait. *Houthis* exploit this contradiction: a movement from a fragile, resource-poor state wields disproportionate global influence by threatening a strategic chokepoint. This demonstrates how non-state actors can leverage geography to amplify power, transforming fragility into bargaining strength. In this respect, their maritime statecraft not only reshapes the Yemeni conflict but also redefines the Red Sea as a zone where structural weakness can be turned into geopolitical advantage.

#### 6. Redefining Security and Policy Implications :

Mainstream accounts of *Houthi* maritime activity often reduce their actions to piracy, terrorism, or proxy warfare. In this view, *Houthis* are spoilers: insurgents who disrupt global trade, threaten shipping, and destabilize an already fragile region (Mazzucco, 2024). While such interpretations capture elements of truth, they obscure the deeper logic of *Houthi* behavior at sea. *Houthis* are not simply dismantling maritime security but actively experimenting with a fragile and coercive form of order making (Carboni, 2025). Their actions combine coercion, regulation, economic extraction, and ideological performance, producing a patchwork system of authority that complicates conventional notions of insurgency and sovereignty. At the core of this strategy is the use of coercive diplomacy. *Houthi* attacks on oil tankers, cargo ships, and even naval assets are rarely random. They are calibrated to inflict material costs on adversaries while sending political messages to regional and global powers that they must be treated as indispensable interlocutors in negotiations over Yemen and the wider Red Sea order.

This elevates them beyond the status of a domestic insurgent group and situates them as regional actors capable of shaping international security agendas. Yet coercion alone does not explain *Houthis'* maritime practices. Equally important is their pursuit of symbolic sovereignty. Control of *Hodeida* allows them to regulate imports, impose taxes, and oversee shipping (Lackner, 2024). These acts function not only as revenue-generating mechanisms but also as rituals of rule. They communicate to local populations and international traders that they , not the internationally recognized government, control the gateways of commerce. Similarly, their issuance of warnings to foreign vessels and restrictions on fishing zones enact a performative sovereignty that extends their claim of authority from land to sea (Khachaturian, 2021). These practices may lack formal legal standing, but they reproduce the essential functions of statehood.

The economic dimension reinforces this authority. The Red Sea has become an economic frontier for *Houthis*, offering opportunities to generate rents that sustain their war effort. Control over coastal trade routes facilitates smuggling in fuel, arms, and consumer goods. Illicit taxation on goods passing through ports provides steady revenue. These practices provide *Houthis* with a measure of fiscal autonomy, reducing reliance on local taxation and external sponsors. They also

bind global economic systems—shipping, insurance, and trade flows—into *Houthi*'s survival strategy. Maritime disruption serves not only ideological or military goals but also constitutes a critical mechanism of resource extraction embedded in the broader war economy. Overlaying coercion, sovereignty, and economics is an ideological framework that situates maritime activity within narratives of justice and resistance. *Houthi* leaders consistently frame their attacks as solidarity with Gaza, defiance of Western imperialism, or as defense against Saudi-led aggression (Alwadeai, 2025). This normative claim making transforms coercive operations into symbolic performances of legitimacy. By linking maritime disruption to global struggles, *Houthi*s appeal not only to their domestic supporters but also to transnational audiences sympathetic to anti-imperialist narratives.

Taken together, these dimensions—coercive diplomacy, symbolic sovereignty, economic rent seeking, and normative claim making—reveal that *Houthi* maritime activity cannot be dismissed as disorder. It constitutes a deliberate, multidimensional attempt to produce a contested order in one of the world's busiest maritime corridors. *Houthi*s are simultaneously dismantling established security structures and constructing alternative ones, however fragile (Knights, 2024). What emerges is a patchwork order, enacted inconsistently but meaningfully, where insurgents regulate and disrupt, tax and resist, coerce and claim legitimacy. This reinterpretation carries significant implications. For scholars, it underscores the limitations of binary frameworks that divide the world into order and chaos, state and non-state, sovereignty and its absence. *Houthi*s demonstrates that insurgents can be producers of governance as much as spoilers of stability (Carboni, 2025). Their maritime practices exemplify a form of rebel governance at sea, extending insights from land-based conflicts into the maritime domain. They also illustrate quasi-statehood, exercising state-like functions without international recognition (Staniland, 2012).

For policymakers, the *Houthi* case highlights the difficulty of treating maritime insurgency with traditional counter-piracy or counter-terror frameworks. Naval patrols may deter attacks, but they do not address the governance functions that sustain *Houthi* authority. Ignoring the duality of coercion and regulation risks perpetuating cycles of disruption. Instead, strategies must grapple with the uncomfortable reality that *Houthi*s are building order as well as destroying it. The first implication is that suppression alone is insufficient. Conventional policy responses—naval patrols, targeted strikes, and sanctions—are rooted in the assumption that *Houthi*s are mere disruptors. Yet treating them as pirates or terrorists overlooks the governance functions they perform. Suppression cannot eliminate their ability to regulate ports, extract taxes, and enact symbolic sovereignty. Effective strategies must therefore account for the governance dimensions of their authority. This does not mean legitimizing them uncritically, but it does mean recognizing that their endurance rests not only on Iranian support or military power but also on their capacity to regulate and perform authority in

ways that resonate locally. The second implication is diplomatic. *Houthis'* maritime actions are bargaining tools. Each disruption of shipping is designed to increase their advantage in negotiations. Ignoring this political logic prolongs insecurity by misreading the purpose of maritime disruption. A durable settlement of Yemen's conflict may require incorporating *Houthis'* role in maritime governance into peace talks. While politically uncomfortable, acknowledging their sovereignty experiments—at least as *de facto* realities—may be unavoidable. Otherwise, the Red Sea will remain hostage to cycles of coercion.

The third implication extends to global trade regimes. Insurance markets, shipping companies, and international navies have long operated under the assumption of state monopolies on security. *Houthis* disrupt this assumption by demonstrating that non-state actors can impose costs, regulate passage, and institutionalize authority. Trade regimes must adapt to hybrid security environments where multiple sovereignties coexist. This adaptation may involve recalibrating insurance risk models, revise naval coordination, and develop new protocols for engagement with non-state regulators. Finally, *Houthis'* maritime statecraft signals a broader erosion of the state monopoly over security in the Middle East. Just as *Hezbollah* and *Hamas* have institutionalized authority in land, *Houthis* are institutionalizing authority at sea (Alwadeai, 2025). This trend points toward a regional order defined by multi-layered sovereignty, where insurgent groups become durable actors in security governance. Regional strategies must therefore move beyond eradication and address the political and institutional factors that allow such groups to entrench authority.

Ultimately, the significance of *Houthi* maritime interventions lies not only in their capacity to disrupt global trade but also in their broader redefinition of what security means in the Red Sea. Rather than a vacuum of authority, what emerges is a hybrid, layered system in which non-state actors play enduring roles in governance. *Houthis* have repositioned themselves as regional maritime actors. By blending coercion with governance, rent extraction with legitimacy, and violence with symbolism, they are reshaping the Red Sea into a zone of contested but undeniable order.

## 7. Conclusion:

In reinterpreting *Houthi* activity in the Red Sea as maritime statecraft rather than mere disruption, this study challenges dominant paradigms that frame the movement exclusively as a proxy of Iran, a terrorist organization, or a band of maritime spoilers. *Houthis* are not only attacking ships to destabilize global commerce; they are producing a patchwork maritime order that is coercive yet structured, violent yet regulatory, predatory yet political. Their practices constitute an experiment in governance that extends insurgent authority into one of the world's most vital waterways. Recognizing this duality is essential for designing policies that can both secure global trade and address the deeper transformations

of sovereignty occurring in conflict-torn regions. Theoretically, the case reveals how sovereignty functions as practice rather than possession, enacted through regulation, coercion, and symbolic claims. It shows governance to be hybrid, combining violence with administrative routines, and demonstrates how fragility can be transformed into advantage when insurgents occupy geostrategic chokepoints. *Houthis'* ability to shape Red Sea security underscores how actors from peripheral contexts can exploit geography to punch above their weight.

Comparative insights reinforce this conclusion. Like *Hezbollah* and *Hamas*, *Houthis* blend insurgency with governance, institutionalizing authority through both coercion and service provision. Yet unlike these groups, they extend this logic into maritime space, transforming the Red Sea into a laboratory of contested sovereignty. Their maritime authority is embedded in a broader political project that seeks endurance and legitimacy. They have used governance experiments to consolidate authority in ways that make them unavoidable interlocutors for regional and global powers. These dynamics expose the insufficiency of suppression alone. Naval patrols, sanctions, and counter-terror frameworks may contain short-term disruption but fail to address the governance dimensions of *Houthi* authority. Ignoring these dimensions risks entrenching cycles of insecurity and normalizing contested governance in the Red Sea. The long-term danger is that other insurgent groups may follow this precedent.

If these lessons are ignored, the Red Sea may become the first maritime arena where hybrid sovereignty is normalized. This would mark a structural transformation in global security governance, eroding the state monopoly over the commons. If, however, these lessons are taken seriously, the *Houthi* case can serve as a catalyst for reimagining how international frameworks engage with insurgent authority. Doing so requires adaptive strategies that combine naval deterrence with political negotiation, economic risk management with acknowledgment of governance realities. In short, *Houthis'* interventions in the Red Sea are not aberrations to be dismissed but signals of a broader shift in how power, sovereignty, and order are constructed in the 21st century. They compel us to rethink the categories of piracy, terrorism, and proxy warfare, and to confront the uncomfortable reality that insurgents can become regulators of global trade. The challenge for scholars and policymakers alike is to recognize this transformation, theorize it rigorously, and design responses that are as hybrid and adaptive as the orders insurgents themselves are now creating.

#### References

- Abdalla, A. (2024). "The roles of external parties in the April 15 war and their interests in Sudan". *The Journal of Social Encounters*, 8 (2), 108–133.
- Agar, V. (2022). "Semi-peripheral statehood and the materialist critique of political authority". In Fahimi, M. et al. (Eds.), *State and statehood in the*

*Global South : Theoretical approaches and empirical studies* (pp. 79–104). Cham : Springer.

- Ahmad, M., & Khawaja, H. (2025). "US role in Yemen conflict : Implications for regional stability and global leadership", *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 9 (2), 389–401.
- Alaka, O. (2025). "Post-sovereignty : Reframing democratic legitimacy in Africa". Available at SSRN 5375101.
- Al-Sallal, Y. A. S. (2024). *The Houthi rebel movement : Analysis on the role of wartime social order, legitimacy and greed in the Houthi rebel resilience in Yemen between 2017 and 2023* (Master's thesis), Utrecht University, Holland.
- Alsudani, A. (2025). "Yemen at the crossroads: The Houthis, Iran, and Saudi Arabia under the spotlight". *LSE Undergraduate Political Review*, 8 (1).
- Alwadeai, A. (2025). "The 'Yemeni threat' to Saudi Arabia: Mirage in the desert or quicksand beneath the throne?" *Middle East Critique*, 1–18.
- Carlson, J. (2024). "Houthi motivations driving the Red Sea crisis : Understanding how Ansar Allah's strategic culture goes beyond Gaza and Iran". *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, 15 (2), 94–114.
- Elayah, M. et al. (2025). "Navigating post-conflict governance in Yemen: Decentralization, federalism, and the path to stability". *Development Policy Review*, 43 (5),
- Evers, H. (2017). *Structure and agency in the sociology of development : Theories of structural heterogeneity*. Singapore : ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Gupta, T., and Ganguly, A. (2025) "Choke point of power : The Red Sea crisis and extension of geopolitical rivalries". *International Journal of Social Science Research (IJSSR)*, 2 (2), 61–75.
- Khachaturian, R. (2021). The state as social relation : Poulantzas on materiality and political strategy. In Tushnet, M. and Schneiderman, D. (Eds.), *Research handbook on law and Marxism* Cheltenham : Edward Elgar.
- Knights, M. (2024). "A draw is a win : The Houthis after one year of war". *CTC Sentinel*, 17 (9).
- Lackner, H. (2024). *From local governance to constitution building : Yemen after 10 years of conflict*. Stockholm : International Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance.
- Lavoie, S. (2020). *A comparative analysis of failed strategies to achieve international recognition: Somaliland, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh*.

- Mazzucco, L. (2024). "Iran and the Houthis' asymmetric maritime warfare campaign in the Red Sea : A study of the sponsor-proxy model". *Journal for Iranian Studies*, 8, 20–25.
- Rotberg, R. (2004). *State failure and state weakness in a time of terror*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Duyvesteyn, I et al (2016). Reconsidering rebel governance. In J. Abbink, M. de Bruijn, & K. van Walraven (Eds.), *African frontiers: Insurgency, governance and peacebuilding in postcolonial states* (pp. 31–50). London: Routledge.