



مركز اليمن والخليج للدراسات

YEMEN & GULF CENTER FOR STUDIES

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## Strategic Estimates



### Al-Shabaab and the Houthis: Close Ties and Weapons Smuggling Networks

**Zeinab Mostafa Roweha**

PhD Researcher in Political Science – Cairo University



[www.ygcs.center](http://www.ygcs.center)



[info@ygcs.center](mailto:info@ygcs.center)

اليمن - عدن

00967718444070 / 00967773222566



In recent years, the Somali coast has acquired increasing strategic importance as a principal route for smuggling weapons to the Houthis in Yemen, overtaking other transit pathways. The majority of intercepted arms shipments destined for the Houthis were found to have traversed the Somali coastline. Cooperation in arms transfers and smuggling has become the most significant dimension of the relationship between the Houthis and Somalia's Al-Shabaab movement. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) report issued on 24 July exposed the depth of entanglement between the two groups, confirming the existence of a clandestine arms smuggling network linking them, along with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The expansion of these connections represents a serious threat to the security of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea.

### **Multifaceted Cooperation**

Doctrinal differences have not prevented Al-Qaeda and its affiliate, Somalia's Al-Shabaab, from cooperating with the Houthi movement. Both sides have increasingly sought to enhance their capabilities and broaden their sphere of influence. Since 2022, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Houthis have opted to prioritise shared interests over disputes, formalising a pact that includes non-aggression,

coordination against Yemeni government forces, and the exchange of security and intelligence information. Against the backdrop of the Houthis' rising regional prominence—evident in their role in the war between Gaza and Israel and their alignment with Russia in the war against Ukraine—Al-Shabaab has been swift to exploit these developments. As a result, cooperation between the two groups has expanded across several dimensions:



## Facilitating Weapons Smuggling to the Houthis

The facilitation of weapons transfers to the Houthis via the Somali coast constitutes the most valuable service rendered by Al-Shabaab to the movement. Exploiting Somalia's extensive shoreline and its geographic proximity to Yemen—at some points separated by only 280 kilometres—the group has played a pivotal role in sustaining these smuggling operations.

Interceptions of weapons shipments in recent years have revealed the existence of a clandestine network linking the Houthis and Al-Shabaab, composed of individuals with considerable expertise in arms trafficking. The latest UNSC report succeeded in identifying key figures within this network, most notably the Somali national Abdirizak Hassan Yusuf, who works in cooperation with Yemeni arms dealer Abu Kamam to facilitate weapons transfers between the Houthis and Al-Shabaab.

The report also highlighted the involvement of other individuals engaged in smuggling between the Houthis and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Among them is Abu Saleh al-Obaidi, who collaborates with smugglers transporting arms from Al-Mahra to Marib and onward to Al-Jawf. Meanwhile, maritime smuggling operations are directed by Abu Salman al-Masri.

These findings align with the confessions of the crew of the vessel Al-Sharwa, intercepted in July by the Yemeni National Resistance Forces (NRF) under the command of Brigadier General Tareq Saleh while transporting a shipment of 750 tonnes of weapons destined for the Houthis. The revelations exposed the Houthis' establishment of an organised cell devoted to arms smuggling, with its members trained in Iran under the supervision of Mohammed Jaafar Al-Talbi.

This cell includes Somali and Indian operatives alongside Yemeni sailors. Recruitment





begins with the targeting of carefully selected individuals, who are subsequently dispatched to Houthi training camps in Iran. Two principal routes facilitate their transfer: one starting from Sana'a airport to Jordan, continuing to Lebanon and Syria, and ultimately reaching Tehran.

The alternative route runs through Oman, from where recruits are flown to Iran. Upon arrival, they are transferred to camps in Bandar Abbas, where they undergo specialised training in preparation for the smuggling operations to which they are assigned. Importantly, recruits are not informed of the precise contents of the shipments, which are concealed within the structures of various equipment and dispatched under commercial cover.

The onward journey is carefully timed to ensure passage through the Bab El-Mandab Strait under the cover of night, thereby reducing the risk of detection by coastguard patrols

and the naval forces of the NRF.

The smuggling cells are directed by senior Houthi figures, among them Faisal Ahmed Ghalib Al-Hamzi and Hussein Hamid Hamza Mohsen Al-Attas, the latter serving as Chairman of the General Authority for Fish Resources Development (GAFRD) in the Red Sea. Al-Attas is tasked with recruiting sailors and overseeing operations launched from Djibouti and Somalia. He is supported in these activities by Iyad Mohammed Omar Maqbul Atini, Wael Mohammed Said Abdul Wadud, and Omar Ahmed Omar Haj.

Financial operations are managed by Mohammed Durham Qasim Al-Moayyad, known as "Ibrahim Al-Moayyad." At the same time, the recruitment and organisation of smuggling teams are entrusted to Yahya Mohammed Hassan Qasim Al-Iraqi, known as "Yahya Jinniyah." The coordination of Yemeni sailors' travel to Iran is overseen by Mustafa Al-Sharafi.



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Weapons reach the Houthis through three principal routes: smuggling operations from Somalia to the Port of Saleef; an alternative pathway from Bandar Abbas Port to the same destination; or a third route via Djibouti, which was the channel used for the most recent shipment intercepted by the NRF in July.

As indicated in the table, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded thirteen weapons interception operations between Somalia and Yemen from October 2023 to April 2025. These operations were undertaken by Puntland Police Forces, the Yemeni Armed Forces, the United States Navy

(USN), and the African Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS).

On the Yemeni side, smuggling points include the ports of Hodeidah, Saleef, Ras Isa, and Mocha in Taiz Governorate, as well as Ash Shihr and Mukalla in Hadramout Governorate, Balhaf and Beir Ali in Shabwa Governorate, and the ports of Nishtun and Sayhut in Al-Mahrah Governorate. On the Somali side, the principal points comprise Bosaso Port in Puntland state, in addition to the coasts of Burao, Hobyo, Baraawe, Marka, and Qandala, as well as Berbera Port in Somaliland, together with ports in Lower Shabelle, Eyl, and Carmo.

**Table Showing Weapons Interception Operations between Somalia and Yemen since October 2023:**

Date	Place	Interception Implementing Authority	Details
October 22, 2023	Bosaso Port, Somalia	Puntland Police Forces	Puntland Police Forces seized a vessel transporting weapons and ammunition allegedly smuggled from Yemen. The cache included Kalashnikov rifles, PKM machine guns, and pistols, and one suspect was apprehended.
October 23, 2023	Al Ghaydah, Yemen	Yemeni Armed Forces	In Al Ghaydah, police intercepted a shipment of 250 small arms from Somali nationals.
January 11, 2024	49 nautical miles northwest of Socotra, Yemen	United States Navy (USN)	Another consignment was intercepted en route to the Somali coast, intended for ship-to-ship transfer and subsequent delivery to Yemen. The cargo contained components for MRBM and ASCM missiles, including propulsion and guidance systems. Fourteen suspects were detained.



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February 07, 2024	Ras Asir, Somalia	Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF)	A boat carrying weapons intended for pirates was seized, leading to the arrest of three suspects.
February 07, 2024	Carmo, Somalia	Puntland Police Forces	Weapons were confiscated in another operation, with five suspected members of Al-Shabaab taken into custody.
February 15, 2024	Ash Shihr, Yemen	Yemeni Authorities	Yemeni authorities arrested six individuals for alleged involvement in arms smuggling operations from Al-Mahrah to Berbera on the Somali coast, and for links to operatives in Houthi-controlled areas.
May 02, 2024	Eyl, Somalia	PMPF	Weapons were seized in an anti-piracy operation, resulting in the arrest of two suspects identified as pirates.
May 18, 2024	Bosaso, Somalia	PMPF	In a separate incident, weapons were intercepted and four suspects detained.
June 2024	Near Bosaso, Somalia	Puntland Security Force	South of Bosaso, Puntland Security Forces seized suicide drones believed to have originated from Houthi militants in Yemen. Seven suspected Al-Shabaab members were arrested.
August 03, 2024	Mocha, Yemen	Yemeni National Resistance Forces (NRF)	A significant quantity of undeclared components for the development of advanced conventional weapons was intercepted, including Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and hydrogen cylinders intended for UAV fuel cell systems.
August 04, 2024	Bosaso, Somalia	PMPF and Puntland Intelligence and Security Agency (PISA)	Further seizures included anti-aircraft ammunition, PKM machine guns, Kalashnikov rifles, TNT powder, hand grenades, and camouflage suits. Four suspects were detained.
July–September 2024	Lower Shabelle, Somalia	African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)	Al-Shabaab was also found to have received various types of weapons, ammunition, and explosives from Yemen through the ports of Marka and Baraawe.
April 16, 2025	Baraawe	US and Somali Security Forces	US and Somali security forces conducted an airstrike targeting unidentified vessels carrying advanced Al-Shabaab weaponry near Baraawe.

Source: United Nations (UN); Africa Defence Forum (ADF); Conflict Armament Research (CAR); Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

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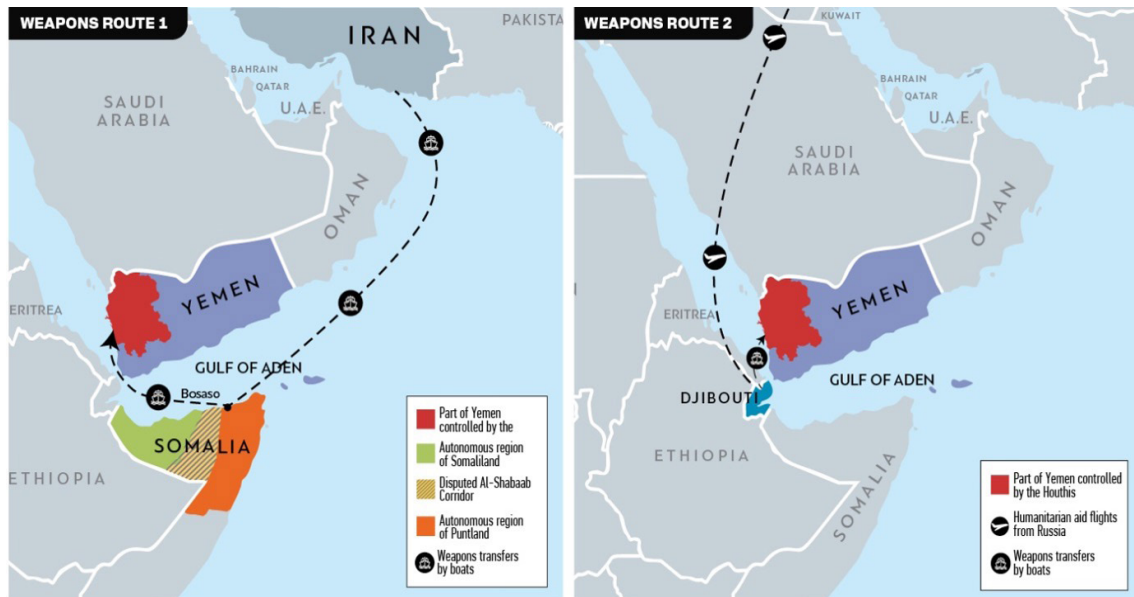


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The smuggling of weapons to the Houthis via Somalia dates back to 2020, according to findings by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC). In August 2022, the confessions of a cell engaged in transporting Iranian weapons to the Houthis confirmed that the Somali route forms part of the principal arms smuggling lines supplying the movement.

Smugglers reportedly deliver shipments to Somalia's Port of Berbera, where they are transferred to other smugglers who carry them onwards to Yemen. The Houthis are reported to pay USD 5,994 for each voyage. Somali ports are also utilised for the smuggling of fuel and fertilisers to the Houthis.

**Map Illustrating the Weapons Smuggling Routes to the Houthis:**



Source: IMed, 2025





The Houthi movement has increasingly relied on the Somali coastline as part of its strategy to diversify the sources and routes through which it secures weapons, in response to the UN embargo on arms supplies to Yemen and the intensifying restrictions and surveillance of the route from Bandar Abbas to Yemen. Between 2015 and 2024, the United States Navy (USN) and its allies intercepted no fewer than eighteen Iranian vessels carrying weapons destined for Yemen.

At the same time, the movement's limited domestic manufacturing capacity has been unable to satisfy its military ambitions. This shortfall was underscored by the contents of the Al-Sharwa shipment, which included advanced naval and aerial missile systems, an air defence system, modern radar equipment, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), surveillance devices, anti-tank missiles, and B10- artillery.

## Arming and Training Al-Shabaab

Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has held the Houthis responsible for the recent proliferation of weapons in the hands of Al-Shabaab, underscoring the emergence of an evolving relationship between the Houthis and both ISIS and Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The latest UNSC report is part of a continuing series of investigations aimed at dismantling the nexus connecting the Houthis and Somalia's Al-Shabaab.

This alliance was effectively cemented through weapons smuggling operations between Somalia and Yemen. During meetings held in Somalia in July and September 2024, the two movements agreed that the Houthis would provide Al-Shabaab with additional weaponry and training. In turn, Al-Shabaab allocated nearly a quarter of its budget to purchasing arms from the Houthis. In contrast, the arms trade has become a key source of funding for the Yemeni group, helping to mitigate the impact of U.S. sanctions.





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The relationship between the two groups in the field of arms supply has advanced to such an extent that the Houthis have relocated part of their manufacturing operations to Somalia. They established bases in the Golis Mountains along the coast of the Sanaag region in Somaliland, where they develop missile systems and conduct testing.

For example, a missile was launched from Hargeisa in Sanaag towards Taleh in the Sool region, covering a distance of 459 kilometres, according to statements by Major Abdirahman Warsame, the former Commander of Somalia's Elite Danab Special Forces.

In recent months, Somalia's Al-Shabaab has achieved notable territorial gains, bolstered by the advanced weaponry acquired from the Houthis. Previously dependent on rudimentary improvised explosive devices and the capture of arms from

the Somali National Army, the group has now gained access to more sophisticated systems, including armed drones and surface-to-air missiles. In 2024, the Houthis dispatched three engineers to Al-Shabaab to support the production of advanced weapons and explosives. They also provided the group's operatives with the expertise and training required to operate these systems. As a result, Al-Shabaab succeeded in reclaiming extensive areas of territory that had previously been secured by the Somali government. Furthermore, the group launched attacks against the African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) in June, killing seven Ugandan soldiers, and claimed responsibility for an attempted assassination targeting the Somali president during his motorcade in March.



## Threat to Red Sea Trade

The disruption of maritime traffic in the Red Sea has generated significant gains for both groups. Since the Houthis began launching missiles at vessels in the Red Sea—under the pretext of supporting Gaza in its war against Israel—piracy in the region, which had been largely dormant since 2017, has resurfaced.

The diversion of ships to the Cape of Good Hope as an alternative to the Red Sea has delivered substantial profits to Al-Shabaab, secured through ransom payments. These have been facilitated by its cooperation with pirates, offering them protection and enabling their attacks in the Gulf of Aden off the Somali coast. Since November 2023, forty-seven piracy-related incidents have been recorded in the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean. One such case occurred in April 2024, when Somali

pirates secured a ransom of USD 5 million for the release of the vessel MV Abdullah..

On another front, cooperation with Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has enabled the Houthis to extend their influence into the Arabian Sea and the western Indian Ocean. This was underscored by statements from Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi, who pledged to block vessels linked to Israel from transiting the Indian Ocean towards the Cape of Good Hope.

Between November 2023 and mid-December 2024, the Houthis launched more than one hundred attacks on commercial and military vessels passing through the Bab El-Mandab Strait, reducing traffic through the strait to just one-third of its previous volume. With the resumption of Houthi assaults on shipping in the Red Sea, the group attacked the Eternity C, a Liberian-flagged bulk carrier,



on 9 July, killing four sailors and sinking the vessel.

The Houthis are reportedly generating an estimated USD 180 million per month in fees paid by shipping agents seeking to secure safe passage through the area.

The cooperation between the Houthis and Somalia's Al-Shabaab serves the strategic interests of both groups by ensuring a steady flow of weapons, generating financial returns, and enabling battlefield advances. For the Houthis, the Horn of Africa represents a critical front and a vital source of strategic depth, given

their overlapping interests in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and, most significantly, Somalia.

This is reflected in the Houthis' attempts to cultivate ties not only with Al-Shabaab but also with the Somali branch of the Islamic State, in order to diversify their access routes into Somali maritime zones. The more fragile Somalia's security environment becomes, the more the Houthis can guarantee a sustainable supply line for arms while preserving their capacity to threaten maritime navigation in the Red Sea.

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