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Dhows, Drones, and Dollars: Ansar Allah's Expansion into Somalia

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Introduction

Yemen's Ansar Allah, better known as the Houthis, has expanded cross-border collaboration with non-state actors in Somalia, namely the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabab and the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS), which is associated with the Islamic State group that emerged in Iraq and Syria in 2014. While these groups diverge in ideology, ambition, and regional focus, they are united in their hostility to the United States and Israel, their pursuit of asymmetrical warfare, and their reliance on illicit economies. Such collaboration aims to strengthen and diversify supply chains, securing access to more sophisticated weaponry, improve the groups' domestic standing, and increase the latitude of Ansar Allah and its main regional backer, Iran, to affect maritime security in the Gulf of Aden and Bab al-Mandab Strait to their advantage. This situation has heightened the sources of instability in the broader region.

Pragmatism Beyond Ideology

Much of the African Horn, especially the Red Sea littoral states, is integral to Yemen's strategic depth due to its geographical proximity and long coastline. These factors have shaped historical patterns of migration, trade exchanges, cultural influence, and religious and social interactions. Yemen's [establishment](#) of the Sanaa Cooperation Forum in 2003, which among other things addressed peace in Somalia, its [mediation](#) in the Somali crisis of 2006–2007, and its hosting of large numbers of displaced Somalis have underscored Yemeni preoccupation with the African country. Yemen has also been the African Horn's [gateway](#) to the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, including during periods of instability and conflict. The International Organization for Migration [reported](#) that 96,670 people crossed the Gulf of Aden into Yemen in 2023 thanks to human trafficking networks, especially from Somalia's Bari and Woqooyi Galbeed regions.

The arms trade in the Red Sea has been a leading factor in Ansar Allah's ties with Somalia. Despite a United Nations arms embargo on Yemen, Iran has supplied weapons surreptitiously to Ansar Allah. Between September 2015 and January 2023, warships from the United States, Saudi Arabia, France, and Australia [intercepted](#) sixteen vessels, carrying approximately 29,000 small arms and light weapons, 365 anti-tank guided missiles, and 2.38 million rounds of ammunition bound for Ansar Allah. Most of the consignments were [transported](#) on dhows used for coastal trade and fishing. In 2020, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime [concluded](#) that a portion of Iranian-supplied arms to Ansar Allah ended up in Somalia.

While Iran's dealings with African Horn countries have been characterized by ups and downs, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [prioritized](#) the region after 1989, later intensifying its efforts in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 1989, Iran backed Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir's rise; in 2006, it transferred weapons to the Islamic Courts Union so it could fight Somalia's government; and in 2008 it [sought a military presence](#) in Eritrea, [allowing it to use the Dahlak islands](#) to send arms to Ansar Allah. In this way Tehran tried to break its international isolation, expand regional partnerships, and introduce supply mechanisms for its proxies, expanding its strategic reach.

Ansar Allah's relationship with Somali nonstate actors, all of them [under arms embargo](#), has evolved over the past decade [through](#) arms traffickers or brokers. This became increasingly important starting in 2016, when Ansar Allah realized it could strengthen its position by [having a capacity to act in Yemen's maritime space](#), whether by [attacking vessels](#) or engaging in smuggling—a lesson it applied during the Red Sea [crisis](#) over Gaza that began in October 2023. Ansar Allah's leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, again expressed this view in January 2025, when he cited the group's maritime [operations](#) on Gaza's behalf, while [supporting](#) developments in "several African countries ... against American and European

hegemony, and American imperialism and occupation [there]." This signaled his interest in broadening Ansar Allah's activities into Africa.

In June 2024, the United States [reported](#) on collaboration between al-Shabab and Ansar Allah. A United Nations report from February 2025 [revealed](#) that representatives of the two groups had met at least twice in July and September 2024 in Somalia, underscoring Ansar Allah's commitment to deepening ties during the Red Sea crisis. Under the reported deal, Ansar Allah would provide al-Shabab with arms and technical expertise in exchange for ramping up piracy attacks and collecting ransoms in the Gulf of Aden and off Somalia's coast.¹ Considering al-Shabab's [cooperation](#) with Somali pirates, in which the former reportedly [receives a 20 percent share of ransoms](#), the Ansar Allah–al-Shabab partnership likely involved using pirates to maximize maritime disruptions.² The United States' fear is that Ansar Allah's weapons deliveries could provide it with a new financing stream, while giving al-Shabab access to more sophisticated arms.

Iran also has longstanding contacts with al-Shabab. In 2017, the IRGC's Quds Force allowed the group to [circumvent United Nations sanctions](#) by using Iranian ports as transshipment points to reexport charcoal, generating revenues. Iran has also [reportedly armed and funded](#) al-Shabab to target U.S. interests in the African Horn, including [Kenya](#). While tangible evidence that Iran has played a role in facilitating Ansar Allah's ties with al-Shabab is required, U.S. intelligence officials [are investigating such a possibility](#). Guled Ahmed, a Somali scholar at the Middle East Institute, is more affirmative, saying, "Iran is at the epicenter of all of this."³ Moreover, al-Qaeda's de facto leader Seif al-Adl is allegedly [being hosted by Tehran](#) and [views](#) convergence between Sunni and Shia militants as necessary to focus on fighting Western countries.

Ansar Allah's relationship with ISS, in turn, has evolved since at least 2021.⁴ The relationship initially focused on the transfer of small arms. Between 2015 and 2022, [U.S.-designated ISS members](#) Abdirahman Mohamed Omar and Isse Mohamoud Yusuf smuggled arms from Yemen, suggesting preexisting connections with Ansar Allah. This was driven both by the domestic needs of ISS, which [operates](#) in Somalia's Puntland region, and Ansar Allah's desire to bolster its revenues, especially after the lull in the Yemen conflict starting in April 2022. When the Gaza war began in October 2023, Ansar Allah sought to increase international pressure for a ceasefire by interdicting maritime traffic in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea. Between November 2023 and May 2024, it reportedly sent representatives to northeastern Somalia to coordinate intelligence gathering and the geolocation of ships in the Gulf of Aden, filling blind spots in its radar coverage, in exchange for short-range suicide drones and technical training.⁵ The Somali Puntland Security Force (PSF) seized five such drones dispatched by Ansar Allah in August 2024, arrested seven individuals suspected of having links to ISS and al-Shabab, and in January of this year ISS [claimed](#) two drone attacks against the PSF. Ansar Allah's relationship with ISS and the latter's access to arms smuggling networks follow on from Ansar Allah's [ties](#) with al-Shabab and the fact that in 2015, ISS leader Abdul Qadir Mumin [formed](#) ISS with defectors from al-Shabab, which he opposes.

While Ansar Allah is a Jarudi Zaydi Shiite group, it has behaved pragmatically in dealing with Sunni jihadi groups, as shown by its [collaboration](#) with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This relationship has involved the transfer of weapons to AQAP, the mutual provision of havens for each other's members, and exchanges of prisoners, demonstrating that connections with al-Shabab and ISS are equally possible.

Expanding Sources of Instability Across the Gulf of Aden

The ramifications of Ansar Allah's deepening collaboration with al-Shabab and ISS are multifaceted and critical to global maritime trade, peace, and security. The parties have common interests, all of which are reshaping security dynamics in the African Horn, the southern Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden, adding to the potential theaters of instability and complicating arms interdiction efforts. These dynamics have also increased Ansar Allah's geopolitical footprint, from which Iran has benefited, giving both parties leverage over a major international sea-lane.

A primary interest of Ansar Allah, al-Shabab, and ISS is their exploitation of illicit networks, particularly [arms](#) and [fuel](#) trafficking networks from [Iran](#). Iran, in turn, sees these groups as helping it to [diversify](#) access to financing channels, smuggling routes, and offshore support bases. Such activities have increased the three groups' sources of revenues and operational capabilities.⁶ Specifically, Ansar Allah's collaboration with Somali non-state actors has facilitated the flow of Iranian weapons and resources to and from Yemen, circumventing the United Nations [arms embargo](#). Weapons transfers often [follow a roundabout route](#). Larger ocean-faring ships leave Iran and travel into Kenyan or Tanzanian waters to avoid detection by international naval forces near the Gulf of Aden, before heading toward Somalia. Then, [smaller boats departing from Somalia](#), using falsified documents, [smuggle arms into Yemen](#), particularly through Ras al-Aara in Lahj Governorate.⁷ Arms dealers and brokers have also sought to transfer surface-to-air missile systems from Eastern Europe to Ansar Allah via Somalia.⁸

Somali non-state actors view Ansar Allah's possession of disruptive conventional weapons and drone capabilities as an encouraging game-changing development.⁹ For Ansar Allah, in turn, the transfer of weaponry

and training is part of a package that has increased the group's revenues, expanded its influence, secured logistical assistance, and allowed Ansar Allah's elevation in the Axis of Resistance. The IRGC, which is keen to undercut Western interests, seeks to [counterbalance](#) rivals such as the United States, the Gulf states, and Türkiye, and expand its [reach](#) into the African Horn. It "oversees the strategic direction of this transactional cooperation, with Ansar Allah acting as a sub-regional coordinator given its operational resilience during the Red Sea crisis and geographical proximity," according to Yazeed al-Jeddayy of the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.¹⁰ The Quds Force, a member of which sits on Ansar Allah's [Jihad Council](#), the group's highest executive body, supervises the weapons transfers.

For Ansar Allah, Somalia's porous coastlines have become critical to ensuring that the group has access to Iranian supplies and Chinese equipment necessary for the growth of its Iranian-supported drone and missile program.¹¹ Much [equipment](#) to Ansar Allah enters through Somalia and Djibouti. Smuggling routes to Yemen include the coastline around the ports of Hodeida, Salif, Ras Issa, and Mocha in Taiz Governorate, al-Shihr and Mukalla in Hadramawt Governorate, Balhalf and Bir Ali in Shabwa Governorate, Nashtun and Sayhut in Mahra Governorate, and, on the Somali side, the Bosaso port in Puntland and the coasts of Burua, Hobyo, Baraawe, Merca, and Qandala, as well as the Barbera port in Somaliland. To supply Ansar Allah, the IRGC [relies](#) on Somali piracy networks, al-Shabab, and arms dealers in Yemen and Somalia. Among those coordinating Ansar Allah's operations in Somalia are Abu Mohammed al-Murtadha and Abu Ibrahim al-Hadi, who not only oversee trafficking deals but also the expansion of cooperation with the Quds Force.¹²

Second, Ansar Allah's collaboration with al-Shabab and ISS has indirectly given Iran an opportunity to [develop its strategic depth](#) in Somalia and the African Horn and widen its latitude to shape the maritime security architecture in the Gulf of Aden and Bab al-

Mandab Strait. During the Gaza conflict, this gave Iran significant leverage over the transportation of hydrocarbons and other goods into the Mediterranean and Europe. An October 2024 report by the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen [indicated](#) that Ansar Allah was "evaluating options to carry out attacks at sea from the Somali coast," having transferred drones and missiles to Somalia. These attacks did not materialize, chiefly because Iran suffered [setbacks](#) in its conflict with Israel between July and December 2024, and feared this would lead to more sustained attacks against Iranian territory.

Ansar Allah's ties with al-Shabab and ISS have also allowed the parties to diversify their tools of access to Somalia's maritime areas, while creating deniability for their partners. For example, in November 2023, Ansar Allah's Abdul-Malek al-Aajri [claimed](#) that his group had seized a vessel, the *Central Park*, when in fact it was Somali pirates who had done so in coordination with Ansar Allah, demonstrating their joint influence. Therefore, maritime attacks are increasingly involving multiple actors across the Gulf of Aden, giving Iran and Ansar Allah the means to disrupt Red Sea trade when advantageous.

Ansar Allah's connections with groups in Somalia have also allowed it to receive information from the other side of the Gulf of Aden in order to strike ships. During the Gaza conflict, Ansar Allah persuaded al-Shabab, ISS, and Somali pirates to attack vessels and block their passage into the Red Sea in solidarity with the Palestinians. An October 2024 UN Panel of Experts on Yemen report [concluded](#) that a third of Ansar Allah's attacks occurred in areas of the Gulf of Aden outside the group's radar coverage, "suggesting that the Houthis received external assistance in identifying, locating and targeting the vessels." Such information was probably provided by the [IRGC's spy ship MV Behshad](#), Russia, al-Shabab, ISS, pirates, or other Somali groups.

In March 2024, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi confidently [expressed](#) his intention to expand maritime operations [toward](#) the Indian Ocean and Cape of Good Hope, tacitly indicating the possibility of using other countries' territory to organize direct or proxy attacks. The [uptick](#) in Somali piracy during Israel's offensive in Gaza, alongside Ansar Allah's disruption of Red Sea maritime traffic, was probably no coincidence, [corroborating](#) reports of a partnership between Ansar Allah and al-Shabab.

A third factor behind the collaboration of Ansar Allah, al-Shabab, and ISS, is their shared desire to broaden the front against the United States, Israel, and those African countries supporting the Americans, which they regard as rivals or enemies. The transfer of drones and [surface-to-air missiles](#) to al-Shabab, and suicide drones to ISS, has improved the asymmetrical warfare capacity of both groups. This has increased threat perceptions in Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, and Kenya (whose [border region](#) with Somalia is unstable), while increasing the groups' ability to target regional security forces, including those from the Somali National Army, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia, and U.S. Africa Command. The proliferation of drones has also created an environment in which Western resources may have to be reallocated elsewhere, with Ansar Allah likely hoping this may ease pressure on the group.

There are also domestic motivations for why Ansar Allah has deepened its relations with al-Shabab and ISS, posing potential risks for regional stability. Ansar Allah hopes to see its improved capabilities, networks, and resources in Somalia reflect positively on the trajectories of AQAP and the [Islamic State in Yemen](#) against Ansar Allah's adversaries. Its goal is to increase Sunni jihadi actions in Yemen, which would fuel instability in government-held areas, discrediting the Yemeni government both internally and internationally and deepening mistrust within the government camp.

Ansar Allah appears to be succeeding in this strategy. The UN recently [issued a report indicating](#) that al-Shabab "reportedly sent over a dozen operatives to AQAP to acquire operational expertise and knowledge including in unmanned aerial vehicle technology,"¹³ underscoring the potential for spillover. Given such convergence, AQAP has been increasingly focused on [targeting](#) Western interests and forces aligned with Yemen's government and the Southern Transitional Council, especially since 2021. This encompassed employing booby-trapped [drones](#) in 2023. Like al-Shabab and ISS, Ansar Allah and AQAP view the Yemeni government as "pro-Western," and during the Gaza war AQAP's resolve to deepen its collaboration with Ansar Allah only increased. As for Iran, the weakening of central governments in Yemen and Somalia has created a vacuum allowing it to expand its leeway to intervene and pursue Tehran's interests across the Gulf of Aden. This was especially important after the Iran-dominated Axis of Resistance was substantially weakened in the conflict with Israel between October 2023 and December 2024, raising Ansar Allah's value in the axis and in Iran's calculations.

Conclusion

The expansion of Ansar Allah's relationships with Somali non-state actors resonates with Iranian foreign policy objectives in the African Horn. Iran, whose Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Nasser Kanani, has described Africa as a "continent of opportunities," has been revising its African Horn strategy in recent years, restoring diplomatic ties with Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia in 2023–2024. Ansar Allah's footprint in Somalia is a symptom of Iran's engagement in the African Horn. Furthermore, Ansar Allah's focus on regional smuggling networks is expected to increase now that the United States again [designated](#) the group as a foreign terrorist organization in February 2025 and imposed sanctions on seven of its leaders implicated in smuggling and arms procurement.

The IRGC, mindful of the strategic implications Ansar Allah's actions have had on global maritime trade and security, has been reinforced in its belief in the importance of having sway in the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, and toward the Cape of Good Hope. As Iran aims to project power throughout the region and beyond, its aim is to be able to have an impact on maritime developments far from its shores. Polarization, conflict, poverty, fragmentation, and corruption will remain enabling conditions for such an ambition in the medium term. But whether the contrary ideological objectives of Sunni and Shiite jihadi groups will end up dividing the Iranians and Ansar Allah from al-Shabab and ISS, despite their shared anti-Western militancy, remains to be seen.

About the Authors

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Notes

- 1 See paragraphs 40–41 of the report to the UN Security Council.
- 2 Author online interview with Guled Ahmed, a Somali Horn of Africa expert and non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute, February 5, 2025.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Author online interview with a Somali security official who asked to remain anonymous, Puntland, Somalia, January 25, 2025.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Author online interview with Guled Ahmed, *op. cit.*
- 7 In-person interview with a Yemeni customs authority official who asked to remain anonymous, Yemen, January 22, 2025.
- 8 In-person interview with a Yemeni security official who asked to remain anonymous, Yemen, January 20, 2025.
- 9 Author interview with Guled Ahmed, *op. cit.*; and with Yazeed al-Jeddawy, research coordinator at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 16, 2025.
- 10 Author interview with Yazeed al-Jeddawy, *op. cit.*
- 11 Author online interview with a Yemeni coastguard officer who asked to remain anonymous, February 18, 2025.
- 12 In-person interview with a Yemeni security official who asked to remain anonymous, Yemen, January 17, 2025.
- 13 See paragraph 71 of the report to the UN Security Council.



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