



GULF December 2019

The Houthis and Israel: dangerous rhetorics

The threat perception level between the Houthis of Yemen and Israel has been rapidly rising. While hosting a senior US delegation visiting Jerusalem, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated, on the 28th of October 2019, that Iran aimed to develop precision-guided missiles able to strike Israel from the Yemeni territory [Dan Williams, “Netanyahu says Iran seeking means to attack Israel from Yemen”, *Reuters*, October 28, 2019].

Netanyahu’s public declarations follow Gulf (the newspaper *Al Jarida*, Kuwait) and Israeli (*The Jerusalem Post*) media report regarding Israel’s plan to attack Houthi-held areas in Yemen, as well as positions of Hezbollah in the country, next to the Bab el-Mandeb strait. The Israeli Mossad and Military Intelligence is monitoring the Iranian activity in the sub-region and especially Tehran’s delivery of missiles and drones to the Houthis in Yemen [*The Jerusalem Post*, “Israel plans to attack the Houthis in Yemen -report”, August 22, 2019].

In the last month, two prominent Houthi movement’s figures publicly threatened Israel of attacks. Yahya Al Sarea, the military spokesman of the insurgents, declared that the Houthis will opt for “*an appropriate response*” in case the “*Israeli army acts aggressively*”. In the same way, General Mohammed Nasser Al Atafi, the minister of defense of the self-proclaimed Houthi government, stated the movement and militia has mapped “a [data] *bank of [Israeli] targets, both land and sea-based*” [*The Jerusalem Post*, “Houthi rebels threaten Israel in statements to Arab media”, December 10, 2019].

For both sides, this war of words is part of the traditional propaganda and politics. In fact, “*death to Israel*” and “*curse upon the Jews*” make part of the Houthis’ original slogan, while Israel perceives the Zaydi Shia insurgents as client members of the Iranian proxy galaxy menacing Israel and its national security interests.

This verbal escalation develops in the aftermath of many interconnected events: a consistent Emirati (and Sudanese) military drawdown from the Yemeni Western coast bordering the Red Sea; the opening of

diplomatic talks between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia; the minor implementation of the UN-brokered Stockholm agreement (Hodeida governorate) and the stalled implementation of the Saudi-negotiated Riyadh agreement (Aden, parts of Abyan and Shabwa governorates), the latter allowing the Southern secessionists of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) to enter the internationally recognized institutions; China's reported interest for a military outpost in the Bab el-Mandeb area.

In this tense context, the possibility of maritime attacks in the Red Sea, implying the recourse to plausible deniability by Iran and its network, may rise. The indirect contention between Israel and Iran could reverberate easily on Yemen's conflict balances, hindering the fragile 'work in progress' of diplomacy.

Eleonora Ardemagni – *Associate Research Fellow at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), Teaching Assistant at the Catholic University of Milan and Adjunct Professor at ASERI.*