

Report Part Title: Houthi Missile Sources

Report Title: The Missile War in Yemen

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# Houthi Missile Sources

Since the start of the conflict, the Houthis have employed a diverse inventory of ballistic missiles and other projectiles, which they have acquired from three primary sources: (1) Yemeni government stockpiles, with most equipment initially purchased from the Soviet Union; (2) Iran, through various land- and sea-based smuggling routes; and (3) battlefield capture of Arab coalition stocks, though this is the least significant source.

## *Yemeni Government Stockpiles*

The Yemeni military has long maintained stockpiles of ballistic, antiship, antitank, and surface-to-air missiles. Yemen acquired its first Scud missiles from the USSR in the 1970s. The Yemeni civil war in 1994 featured ballistic missile exchanges between the South and the North using Scud missiles and OTR-21 Tochka missiles, respectively.<sup>63</sup> Yemen has also received missiles since then from Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.<sup>64</sup>



*Entrance to the headquarters of the 19th Infantry Brigade in Bayhan, Yemen. According to a 2016 UN report, Houthi forces plundered this depot and faced “almost no resistance.” The brigade carried a missile arsenal of 104 RPGs and 270 antitank missiles.*

United Nations

Yemen's Houthi movement has benefitted from Sana'a's weak control over its weaponry. UN experts noted that even before the current Yemeni civil war, Houthi forces "frequently looted" government weapons caches between 2004 and 2010.<sup>65</sup> Illicit seizures increased substantially, however, following the fall of Yemen's President Muhammad Saleh, as the political turnover from Saleh to Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi was fractious and large pockets of the military and political establishments remained loyal to Saleh. Only an estimated 60 percent of the Yemeni military remained with Saleh and joined him as he transitioned to support the Houthis.<sup>66</sup>

As Saleh and his military loyalists aligned with the Houthis, they brought their arms with them. One UN report notes that the internationally recognized Yemeni military may have lost control of nearly 70 percent of its weapons cache.<sup>67</sup> A 2018 UN report finds that in early 2015, "the 5th and 6th missile brigades aligned themselves with the Houthi-Saleh forces."<sup>68</sup> While initial coalition airstrikes destroyed a significant number of these government depots, various missiles and associated infrastructure remained. Houthi forces very likely obtained most of their first ballistic missiles from government inventories, which included legacy Scud-type and OTR-21 Tochka ballistic missiles.

#### **BATTLEFIELD CAPTURE**

Houthi forces have also acquired military equipment and arms, including rockets, through battlefield capture from coalition forces and allied militias. A 2016 report provides a prime example of this issue, finding that Houthi troops had captured at least 16 C-90C rocket launchers from either Saudi forces or local pro-Hadi fighters that Saudi Arabia had equipped. Simple accidents also fuel rocket proliferation. In April 2015, for example, Houthi fighters seized RPG-26 variants accidentally airdropped by the coalition into Houthi-controlled territory. A Houthi leader took a picture of the shipment holding a thank-you note addressed to King Salman (See Image 5).



*RPG-26 variant inadvertently airdropped by the Arab coalition to Houthi forces. The note reads, "Thank you [King] Salman, Peace Mekhlafi."*

United Nations

## Iran

Over the past four years, U.S. and Arab coalition officials have collected and publicized evidence of Iranian missile smuggling to the Houthis. This evidence includes missile debris with Iranian manufacturing labels, naval interdictions of missile smuggling dhows originating from Iran, and missile-related training and equipment materials in Farsi seized from Houthi-controlled territory. Missiles such as the Burkan series ballistic missiles, the Quds-1 cruise missile, the al-Mandab-1 antiship missile, and the Sayyad-2C surface-to-air missile all bear Iranian fingerprints in design and manufacturing (See Appendix).



*At a press conference at Joint Base Anacostia on December 14, 2017, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley unveiled previously classified information indicating that Iran violated UNSCR 2231 by providing Houthi rebels in Yemen with arms.*

Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

Iran supports the Houthis as a cheap and effective way to challenge Saudi Arabia and other rivals. Similar to Lebanese Hezbollah and various militias in Iraq, the Houthis could serve to project Iranian power across the Middle East in ways its regular military cannot.<sup>69</sup> An empowered, Iranian-friendly Houthi force could control critical territory. One scholar explained that Houthi proxies “would effectively put the Quds force on the Saudi border and potentially give Iran a naval and air presence near the Bab-el-Mandeb, and the exit from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean — a key trade route for petroleum and all trade and U.S. naval movements through the Suez Canal.”<sup>70</sup>

Iran demonstrated a close linkage with the Houthis in June 2019, following rising tensions with the United States. During this time, Houthi forces launched two cruise missiles and 15 bomb-laden UAVs. The Houthis also intercepted a U.S. MQ-9 in a shootdown reportedly “enabled by Iranian assistance.”<sup>71</sup> Earlier in May, the Houthis claimed to have launched seven drones over 800 km from the Yemen border to strike two Saudi oil pumping stations.<sup>72</sup> The attacks forced Saudi Arabia to shut down the connecting pipeline for a day.<sup>73</sup> However, U.S. intelligence found that the drones





*A missile component recovered in Saudi Arabia reveals the logo of Iranian manufacturer Shahid Bagheri Industries.*

Jim Watson/AFP via Getty Images

originated from Iran-backed militias in southern Iraq.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, the Houthis claimed responsibility for Iran's September 2019 drone and cruise missile attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities. These false claims of responsibility demonstrate close coordination with Iran, both in military activity and messaging.

Iran has transferred rocket and missile supplies over several routes to the Houthis. One is overland—namely, smuggling weapons into Yemen through bordering Oman into al-Mahra province. A senior Yemeni military source told reporters that one smuggling route runs through Shehen, an unpoliced zone along the Yemeni-Omani border.<sup>75</sup> Drug smugglers had previously used these passages to run illicit narcotics into Saudi Arabia.<sup>76</sup> Iran also delivers rocket and missile parts through smaller sea-ports over various points along the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden.<sup>77</sup> As one UN report importantly notes, “Weapon smuggling to, from, and through Yemen—in some cases with the collusion of security officials and businesspeople—predates the beginning of the current conflict.”<sup>78</sup>

Coalition forces reportedly started seizing Iranian-sourced shipments of antitank missiles traveling overland from Oman to Ma'rib in mid-2016.<sup>79</sup> UN experts contend that Iran uses land routes primarily for ATGM smuggling.<sup>80</sup> However, Iran may have also used these routes to transfer ballistic missile components for assembly in Yemen. Debris from at least 10 Burkan-1 missiles, for example, show evidence of being smuggled and reassembled, which opens the possibility of overland transfer.<sup>81</sup> One U.S. official also claimed that Iran was transferring antiship missiles across the Omani border.<sup>82</sup>

The shift toward greater use of drones by the Houthis has, in some ways, simplified the transfer of firepower from Iran to Yemen. UAVs are smaller and more transportable than ballistic missiles and can be assembled locally. A 2019 UN report noted:

Whereas in 2015 and 2016, complete or partially assembled weapons systems such as extended-range short-range ballistic missiles were supplied to the Houthi forces from abroad, they are now increasingly relying on the import of high-value components, which are then integrated into locally assembled systems such as extended-range unmanned aerial vehicles.<sup>83</sup>

In more than one respect, the Yemen missile war is evolving into a conflict characterized by a complex mix of air and missile attack.

Figure 4: Weapons Smuggling and Weapon Seizures Over Land

