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Special Issue: Extremism, Radicalisation and Terrorism

- Extremism in Pakistan: Assessing the Drift and Trends
Shalini Chawla
- Religious Extremism in Pakistan: An Existential Threat
Sushil Tanwar
- A Terror Haven in the (Re)making? The Spectre of
Terrorism Under the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
Shivoam Shekhawat
- Rising Extremism and Radicalisation in the Maldives
Radhey Tambi
- Deciphering Radicalisation in India
Rahul Jain
- Harvesting Souls Online: Islamic States' Media
Propaganda
Priyadarshini Baruah
- Exploiting Digital Playgrounds: How Terrorist
Organisations Use Gaming for Recruitment and
Radicalisation
Sounya Awasthi
- Conflict and Climate: Analysing the Environmental
Fallout of Houthis' Red Sea Assault
Anadi
- Balancing Act: Combatting Islamist Radicalisation and
Advancing Secular Education in Assam
Shalini Chawla and Priyadarshini Baruah
- Unmanned Aerial Systems in Counter-Terrorism
Operations
Dinesh Kumar Pandey
- *Book Review*

CONFLICT AND CLIMATE: ANALYSING THE ENVIRONMENTAL FALLOUT OF HOUTHIS' RED SEA ASSAULT

ANADI

Since November 2023, the Houthis have carried out many missile and drone attacks on Israeli commercial ships in the Red Sea, aiming to show support for the Palestinians as the war in Gaza worsens.¹ Yahya Saree, a Houthi military spokesperson, has said they will keep targeting Israeli ships and those heading to Israel until the blockade on Gaza ends.² Some believe these attacks are meant to hurt Israel's economy and push for a ceasefire.³ However, the Houthi control of the Red Sea has caused delays in trade, impacting the people in Yemen as well. US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller mentioned that the Houthis' attacks are causing prices to rise and slowing down the delivery of important supplies like food and medicine to places

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1. Ruxandra Iordache, "Middle East Crisis: Houthis say US, UK will Pay a 'Heavy Price' After Yemen Strikes", *CNBC*, January 13, 2024, <https://www.cnb.com/2024/01/12/live-updates-latest-news-on-the-middle-east-and-the-red-sea-crisis.html>. Accessed on August 24, 2024.
2. Iniya Karimanal, "Houthi Rebel Attacks in the Red Sea", Institute for Youth in Policy, 2024.
3. Ibid.

that need them the most.⁴ Such disruption of supplies is making it difficult for the people in need to get necessary assistance, especially those living in countries like Sudan, Ethiopia, and Yemen.

Forces from the United States, Britain, Egypt, France, Israel, and Saudi Arabia have successfully stopped some Houthi attacks, while China, India, Iran, and Italy have increased their naval presence in the area. The US military has also warned of an “environmental disaster” after a Houthi attack on a cargo ship caused an oil spill in the Red Sea.⁵ These recent Houthis attacks in the Red Sea highlight the intersection of climate change and terrorism. The attacks in the Red Sea have far-reaching implications that go beyond immediate geopolitical and security concerns. This article, while situating itself in the wider debate of climate change and terrorism, tries to explore the dual impact of the attacks. It explores both the immediate threat posed by the Houthis and the environmental consequences of the attacks, which could worsen global climate change challenges in the near future.

WHO ARE THE HOUTHIS?

The Houthis are a Yemeni militia group which has been named after their founder Hussein Badre-al-Din al-Houthi.⁶ They represent the Zaydi branch of Shiite Islam. Their rise has been mainly credited to the growing influence of Saudi Arabia in Yemen during the 1980s. Houthis are officially known by the name of Ansar Allah. They run most of the country’s western part and control its Red Sea coastline.⁷ They are the Zaydi Shiites or *Zaydiyyah*. Shiite Muslims are considered to be a minority community and Zaydis are considered as

4. US Department of State, “Houthi Attacks on International Shipping”, February 21, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/houthi-attacks-on-international-shipping/>. Accessed on August 24, 2024.

5. “US Warns of ‘Disaster’ Amid Oil Slick in Red Sea From Ship hit by Houthis”, Al Jazeera, February 24, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/24/us-warns-of-disaster-amid-oil-slick-in-red-sea-from-ship-hit-by-houthis>. Accessed on August 24, 2024.

6. Archie Bland and Bethan McKernan, “Who are the Houthis and How did the US and UK strikes on Yemen Come About?”, *The Guardian*, January 12, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/12/yemen-houthi-rebels-who-are-they-what-attacking-us-uk-airstrikes-red-sea-crisis>. Accessed on August 24, 2024.

7. *Ibid.*

the minority of Shiites in the Islamic world.⁸ Zaydis carry different beliefs and doctrines in comparison to Shiites who dominate in Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere. They are considered to form around 35 per cent of Yemen's population.⁹

The Houthis want more independence for Zaydis in northern Yemen. Today, the Houthis expect a greater say in the Yemeni government to be able to advocate further for the interests of the Zaydi community.¹⁰ They have been involved in the contestation against the Yemeni government since 2004. In 2016, they also announced the setting up of a government.¹¹ The Houthi movement mainly emerged in order to protect and sustain the tribal autonomy in northern Yemen as well as to oppose Western influence in the Middle East.¹² The movement is popular for its anti-American and anti-Semitic narrative, which is very much evident from the group's pervasive slogan: "God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse upon the Jews! Victory to Islam!"¹³

The origin of the Houthis can be traced back to the 1990s when their leader Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi formed the al-Shabab al-Mumanin (Believing Youth) movement.¹⁴ It was formed to integrate the efforts of religious revivalism as well as anti-imperialism. The aim was to educate the local youth about the history of Zaydism in the Saada governorate. For this purpose, al-Houthi started a network of sports clubs, associations and summer camps. Al-Houthi also wanted to protect Zaydism from the imminent intrusion of Salafism and Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia into northern Yemen.

8. Bruce Riedel, "Who are the Houthis, and Why Are We at War with Them?", Brookings, December 18, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/>. Accessed on August 24, 2024.

9. "Who are Yemen's Houthis?", Wilson Centre, July 7, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/who-are-yemens-houthis#:~:text=The%20Houthis%20are%20a%20large,before%20being%20overthrown%20in%201962>. Accessed on August 24, 2024.

10. Dick Streuly, "5 Things to Know About the Houthis of Yemen", *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-263B-3613>. Accessed on August 24, 2024.

11. "Formation of New Houthi Government Does not Help Yemen – U.N. Envoy", *Reuters*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-un-idUSKBN13O2K1/>. Accessed on August 25, 2024.

12. "Houthis", Counter Extremism Project, <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/houthis>. Accessed on August 25, 2024.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

The Houthi movement got more politically involved in 2003 due to the growing support of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh for the US-led war in Iraq.¹⁵ Further, the Houthi rebellion intensified after Saleh sent troops to arrest al-Houthi in 2004.¹⁶ Though al-Houthi was killed in 2004 amidst the clashes with the government, the movement kept going in his name, wherein Saudi forces intervened to support Sanaa. In 2009, the massive Operation Scorched Earth was launched by the Saleh government in order to suppress the Houthis and was financially, militarily and politically supported by the Saudis.¹⁷ However, this movement could not gain any success and the sporadic conflict between the Houthis and the Yemeni government continued.

The Houthis were once a poorly organised rebel group but now, they maintain a huge arsenal which includes cruise and ballistic missiles, and long-range drones.¹⁸ This expansion of their arsenal was mainly supported by Iran, which has supported militias across the Middle East in order to proliferate its own influence. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) shares a close association with the Houthis. The IRGC even provides training and military equipment to the Houthis. For instance, the Iranian ship *Jihan I* was captured while sailing towards Yemen in 2013 with arms intended for the Houthis.¹⁹ A U.N. report from January 2020 says that Iran is still giving the Houthis advanced weapons and parts for their ammunition.²⁰ The Egyptian Centre for Strategic Studies reports that Iran's military has

15. "Who are Yemen's Houthis?", Council on Foreign Relations, February 25, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/who-are-yemens-houthis>. Accessed on August 25, 2024.

16. Ibid.

17. Christopher Boucek, "War in Saada: From Local Insurrection to National Challenge", *Carnegie Papers*, April 2010.

18. Gaya Gupta, "Who are the Houthis and Why is the US Attacking Them?", *The New York Times*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/11/world/middleeast/houthi-yemen-red-sea-attacks.html>. Accessed on August 25, 2024.

19. Louis Charbonneau and Michelle Nichols, "Exclusive: Arms Ship Seized by Yemen May Have Been Somalia-Bound: U.N.", *Reuters*, July 2, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-arms-un/exclusive-arms-ship-seized-by-yemen-may-have-been-somalia-bound-u-n-idUSBRE96101E20130702/>. Accessed on August 25, 2024.

20. Farzin Nadimi, "The UN Exposes Houthi Reliance on Iranian Weapons", February 13, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/un-exposes-houthi-reliance-iranian-weapons>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

special units in Yemen.²¹ Some of these units focus on missiles, others on drones, and some on gathering intelligence and surveillance. The report also says that Iran's military has several command centres in Yemen, including one in Hodeidah and another on the west coast, which helps bring in military forces and weapons.

The Houthis have undertaken several violent activities, mostly against the Yemeni government. However, in late 2009, they briefly fought against the Saudi forces on the northern border. The Houthis and Al Qaeda have also been involved in fighting in the Arabian peninsula for many years.²² In October 2016, the Houthis contested the US Navy's presence in the region by carrying out a series of failed missile attacks. They have also kidnapped many American citizens, including a teacher, a journalist, and a humanitarian aid worker. Furthermore, since 2017, the Houthis have been repeatedly targeting Saudi Arabia, using missiles and drones.²³

OVERVIEW OF THE HOUTHIS' ATTACKS

After the Hamas attack on October 7 and Israel's military response in Gaza, the Iran-supported groups in the region, known as the 'Axis of Resistance,' including the Houthis, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and various militias in Iraq and Syria, have increased their attacks on Israel and US military bases. Among these groups, the Houthis have been especially bold, mainly because they are far from the actual conflict zone. The Houthis have been regularly firing missiles at Israel, even though Israel is over 1,000 miles away from Yemen. In October, they officially declared war on Israel and launched a few missiles at Israel's port of Eilat. However, Israel and the US naval forces have been successful in countering the missiles from Yemen. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have also been attacked by the Houthis in the past through missiles.

21. Seth G. Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, March 11, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-proxy-irans-growing-footprint-middle-east>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

22. n. 12.

23. Dion Nissenbaum and Warren P. Strobel, "Mideast Insurgents Enter the Age of Drone Warfare", *The Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/mideast-insurgents-enter-the-age-of-drone-warfare-11556814441?mod=article_inline. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

The Houthis say these attacks are to support their Palestinian ally, Hamas.²⁴ In mid-November, their target shifted towards ships passing through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea as they realised that it would be difficult for them to hit Israel directly. Their tactics include firing ballistic missiles and drones at ships in the Red Sea and taking over vessels by using helicopters and speedboats.²⁵ For instance, on November 19, Houthi rebels used helicopters to board and seize the *Galaxy Leader*, a cargo ship partly owned by an Israeli businessman.²⁶ After taking control, they directed the Bahamas-flagged ship to the port of Hodeidah, which is controlled by them. The ship was kept off the coast of Yemen, with the crew held captive and given only limited contact with their families.

Over the following month, the Houthis carried out at least 100 attacks of varying intensity on 12 different commercial ships in the Red Sea, most of which had little or no connection to Israel.²⁷ Some of these attacks displayed impressive technological advancements, possibly marking the first use of an anti-ship ballistic missile in combat by any armed group.²⁸ These missiles, which fly at high altitudes and speeds, can significantly increase the range at which military forces can attack enemy ships and make many existing defence systems ineffective. The Houthis have two types of large anti-ship ballistic missiles, the 'Asef' and the 'Tankil,' likely adapted from older Iranian designs.²⁹ However, the versions used by the Houthis

24. Andrea Kuoman, "Red Sea on Edge: Houthi Attacks Disrupt Vital Shipping Routes", *Universidad de Navarra*, February 16, 2024, https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/red-sea-on-edge-houthi-attacks-disrupt-vital-shipping-routes#_ftn10. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

25. Ibid.

26. Jan Gambrell, "Analysis: Iran-Backed Yemen Rebels' Helicopter-Borne Attack on Ship Raises Risks in Crucial Red Sea", *The Associated Press*, November 21, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-red-sea-ship-yemen-houthis-65b611ff878a411900037e7c9a8ee17b>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

27. Natasha Bertrand and Michael Williams, "US and Allies Scramble to Respond to Houthi Attacks on Key Red Sea Shipping Lanes", *CNN*, December 20, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/19/politics/houthi-red-sea-attacks/index.html>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

28. Sébastien Roblin, "We Might Have Just Seen the World's First Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile Attack", *Popular Mechanics*, December 1, 2023, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a45964460/first-anti-ship-ballistic-missile-attack-houthi-rebels/>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

29. Aadil Brar, "Houthi Rebel Missiles in the Red Sea have a Link to China", *Newsweek*, December 20, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-iran-houthis-anti-ship->

seem less advanced than those tested by countries like China in the South China Sea.

The Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have caused severe global trade disruption. The Red Sea is a transit route that shipping vessels take while travelling between Asia and Europe. According to a report in *The Guardian*, this route accounts for 12 per cent of the total world trade.³⁰ A report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) highlights that due to the Houthi attacks, traffic in the Suez Canal has decreased by 42 per cent.³¹ Furthermore, the credit ratings agency Ind-Ra report points out that the Red Sea contestation has increased freight costs by 25-30 per cent.³² The number of containers travelling through the Red Sea has also declined from 500,000 in November to 200,000 in December, which is 66 per cent lower than the pre-pandemic 2017-19 average, as per the trade indicator released by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.³³

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF ATTACKS

Shippers are changing their route due to the increase in attacks on ships sailing the waters of the Red Sea. Ships are taking longer routes through the Cape of Good Hope, rather than through the Suez Canal which is a shorter route between Asia and Europe. This re-routing of vessels results in increased carbon emissions due to increased travelling distance. Moreover, for the companies that are

ballistic-missile-attacks-red-sea-middle-east-1854008. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

30. Richard Partington, "What is the Red Sea Crisis, and What Does it Mean for Global Trade?", *The Guardian*, January 3, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/03/what-is-the-red-sea-crisis-and-what-does-it-mean-for-global-trade>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.
31. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, "Red Sea, Black Sea and Panama Canal: UNCTAD Raises Alarm on Global Trade Disruptions", January 26, 2024, <https://unctad.org/news/red-sea-black-sea-and-panama-canal-unctad-raises-alarm-global-trade-disruptions>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.
32. Aman Sahu, "Red Sea Crisis: Implications of Houthi Attacks on Global Trade, Security", *Business Standard*, February 19, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/red-sea-crisis-implications-of-houthi-attacks-on-global-trade-security-124021900728_1.html. Accessed on August 26, 2024.
33. "How Yemeni Houthi Rebel Attacks on Ships in the Red Sea are Crimping Global Trade", *The Economic Times*, January 15, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/how-yemeni-houthi-rebel-attacks-on-ships-in-the-red-sea-are-crimping-global-trade/articleshow/106778594.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

already struggling to meet their carbon emission targets or lower their climate warming emissions, this re-route of ships has become an additional challenge to deal with. Since the attacks by the Houthis began in the Suez Canal in 2023, a large number of ships powered by heavy fuel oil have had to go through the Cape of Good Hope which adds hundreds of kilometres to each trip. These extra kilometres cause higher carbon emissions. For instance, as per Reuters, a large container ship travelling from Shanghai to Hamburg emits 38 per cent more carbon dioxide or 4.32 million kg, if it travels through the Cape of Good Hope instead of the Suez Canal.³⁴ It has been estimated by the tracking platform ShipsGo that more than 600 vessels have been diverted since the Houthis' attacks began in 2023.³⁵ According to a report from the consultancy Inverto, the additional fuel consumed due to the re-routing of the ships has resulted in approximately an extra 13.6 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions over four months, which is the equivalent of the pollution caused by 9 million cars during the same time period.³⁶ Further, a report from Xeneta, an Oslo-based freight analytics company has pointed out that the carbon emissions due to sailing from Asia to the Mediterranean increased by 63 per cent in the last quarter in comparison to the final three months of 2023.³⁷ Moreover, ships are also sailing at higher speeds in order to make up for the time taken due to the longer distance, which again results in more carbon being burnt. Thus, this ongoing crisis has made it difficult for the companies to meet their net zero target and has increased their carbon footprints across the supply chains. To meet their net zero target, companies will have to reduce their carbon emissions elsewhere in their supply chain or invest in more carbon offset initiatives—both of these available options would be very costly. Furthermore, companies are also choosing to transport their goods by air or by truck due to the ongoing Red Sea crisis. However,

34. "How Disruption from Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea is Driving up Shipping Emissions", *Reuters*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/CLIMATE-CHANGE/COMPANIES-EMISSIONS/myvmanyrkvr/>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

35. *Ibid.*

36. "Houthi Attacks in Red Sea: Shipping Diversions Spewing Carbon Emissions of 9 Million Cars", *Business Today*, April 29, 2024, <https://www.businesstoday.in/world/story/houthi-attacks-in-red-sea-shipping-diversions-spewing-carbon-emissions-of-9-million-cars-427283-2024-04-29>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

37. *Ibid.*

both these modes of transport are much more polluting compared to shipping. According to MIT research, truck journeys are 10 times more polluting than shipping, and air transport generates 47 times the emissions of shipping per ton-mile.³⁸

Moreover, a cargo ship called *Rubymar* was attacked by the Houthis in the Gulf of Aden.³⁹ The *Rubymar* was carrying ammonium nitrate fertilisers onboard and, hence, the sinking of the ship was likely to cause a great environmental disaster. Greenpeace said that the spilling of ammonium nitrate from the sinking ship could adversely affect the marine ecosystem, including the coral reefs, diverse marine life and coastal mangroves in the Red Sea.⁴⁰ According to the Marine Science Department at the University of Jordan, the release of fertiliser from the sinking ship could cause the growth of large amounts of algae, which could further consume so much oxygen that it would become difficult for marine life to survive.⁴¹ The environmental protection agency of the Yemeni government warned of “double pollution” due to the spill, which may affect 78,000 fishers and their families.⁴² In this case, the first risk would be from the oil pollution due to the large amount of fuel oil on board, projected to be around 200 tonnes.⁴³ The second disastrous risk would be to the fish and living organisms like coral reefs and seaweeds due to the high solubility of the fertiliser. Such incidents harm the marine ecosystem which will have a disastrous impact on the food web. Moreover, this incident could adversely impact thousands of jobs in the fishing industry in the region as well as disrupt the supplies of food and fuel to the littoral states, including Yemen.

38. “Here’s How Disruptions in the Red Sea are Driving up Carbon Emissions”, *Business Standard*, May 28, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/here-s-how-disruptions-in-the-red-sea-are-driving-up-carbon-emissions-124052800434_1.html. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

39. Lipika Pelham, “Cargo Ship Attacked by Houthis Sinks off Yemen Coast”, *BBC*, March 3, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68457445>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. “Sinking of *Rubymar* in Red Sea Poses Grave Environmental Risks, Experts Warn”, *The Guardian*, March 5, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/05/sinking-of-rubymar-in-red-sea-poses-grave-environmental-risks-experts-warn>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

43. *Ibid.*

The recent attack by the Houthis against the oil tanker *Mt Delta Sounion* is more concerning in comparison to the *Rubymar* and *Tutor* last year, because the latter ones were carrying dry bulk cargo, while the former was carrying environmentally damaging oil.⁴⁴ *Mt Delta Sounion* was carrying 150,000 tonnes of crude oil which can create navigational and environmental hazards in the region.⁴⁵ The attack on the *Mt Delta Sounion* would result in the spilling of millions of barrels of oil in the Red Sea. Oil spills carry the potential to destroy the fishing industry and marine ecosystem. As the majority of the population in the region relies on fishing industries and marine ecosystems for their livelihoods, it will impact the survival of many human lives. Further, it can also disrupt the delivery of humanitarian aid to the region.

CONCLUSION

The attacks by the Houthis on commercial ships sailing through the Red Sea are driven by geopolitical motives and are highly concerning for the geopolitics of the region as well as the overall environmental sustainability of the planet. This also brings forward the complex relationship between terrorism and environmental degradation. This contestation has not only adversely impacted the global trade and supply chains, its potential impact extends beyond the immediate countries in the region. The re-routing of ships and consequent rise in carbon emissions further shows how acts of terrorism can further impact global climate challenges. Hence, there is a need for the adoption of a security approach that takes into account both traditional and non-traditional threats. The environmental consequences due to oil spills, and sinking of ships further highlight the vulnerability of the marine ecosystem due to such hostile actions. The Red Sea, which is a critical trade route, now faces risks that pose a threat to its biodiversity and the livelihoods of millions of individuals who are dependent on its resources. The environmental disaster that the Houthis' attacks can potentially cause also shows that the

44. Robert Wright, "Attack on Oil Tanker in Red Sea Threatens 'Severe Ecological Disaster'", *Financial Times*, August 25, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/7f886279-fecb-4410-b402-fbf85b9411b1>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

45. *Ibid.*

group has no regard for the environment. Further, the group might decide to attack the carbon storage facilities to be built underneath the seabed in order to gain global attention. In fact, researchers have established that a minuscule carbon storage leakage of 0.1 per cent per year can cause additional carbon dioxide emissions of 25 gigatonnes.⁴⁶ Moreover, such attacks also give incentives to other militias to attack ships carrying toxic substances. Militias interested in maritime terrorism might find the growing sea-based infrastructure an attractive target as it guarantees them a global platform. Hence, it is important to address these challenges through a multi-stakeholder and multi-faceted policy approach.

It is important to strengthen international naval cooperation to secure the Red Sea. A coordinated presence in the region is significant to deter further attacks as well as to quickly respond to such environmental emergencies. In order to address the damage caused by such hazardous incidents, it is important to formulate comprehensive environmental contingency plans by involving international and regional organisations. Further, advanced technologies like satellite monitoring and drones can be utilised for surveillance purposes, which would be helpful in early detection and taking preventive actions. There is a need for the adoption of maritime policies that take into consideration climate resilience and promote green technologies so that the carbon footprint of global trade can be reduced. Thus, by addressing both the immediate security threat along with its broader environmental effects, the international community needs to cooperate to work towards a more stable and sustainable future in the critical region.

46. Elisabeth Braw, "The Houthis Have Declared War on the Environment", *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/18/houthis-environment-rubymar-maritime-terrorism-pollution/>. Accessed on August 26, 2024.

