The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Supporting Houthi Rebels Is Diplomatic Suicide

By Saahil Menon

November 04, 2024



Yemeni men brandish their weapons and hold up portraits of Huthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi in the Huthi-controlled Yemeni capital Sanaa. **Mohammed Huwais / AFP**

On Dec. 8, 2022, Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout had his 25-year prison sentence cut short by the Biden administration to secure the release of American basketball player Brittney Griner from a Mordovian penal colony on trumped-up drug possession charges.

Nonetheless, recent revelations that he is on the cusp of brokering $10 million worth of automated weaponry sales to the Houthi movement suggest otherwise. Admittedly, Bout might not have received President Vladimir Putin's blessing for his post-incarceration wheeling-and-dealing given the immediate threat his Yemeni clients pose to Russia's regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Following a 2014 coup d'état in Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula's poorest nation, then Saudi Defense Minister Mohammed Bin Salman waged an all-out military campaign and economic

siege against the Iranian-backed Houthi insurgents with help from the UAE, hoping to bomb and starve them into submission. That said, the Houthis' capacity to bring the war home and imperil national security in expat-driven sheikhdoms which pride themselves on being safe havens for foreign direct investment forced the aggressors to pursue an off-ramp. The puritanical strand of Shia Islam the Houthis adhere to has, however, left them immune to being bought off with their neighbors' blood-soaked petrodollars.

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Saudi Arabia's rationale behind entertaining Chinese-initiated peace talks with Iran last year was the misguided notion that normalizing relations would convince the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to yank on Ansarallah's leash. Though routinely labeled an Iranian proxy, the Houthis have far greater agency and latitude than was presumed to be the case before Oct. 7, 2023. The Red Sea Crisis they manufactured in defense of Palestine bears testament to how ideology supersedes all other material or geostrategic considerations for the Houthis. By the first quarter of 2024, year-on-year maritime traffic through the Suez Canal and Bab El-Mandeb Strait had halved thanks to Houthi-led piracy.

The Kremlin's underhanded cooperation with Yemen's de-facto government is just the latest example of its ineptitude at navigating the deeply complex rivalries dividing the Middle East. The Russian Envoy in Tehran was summoned twice last year over Moscow endorsing the UAE's territorial claims to three disputed islands in the Persian Gulf. Needless to say, arming and rehabilitating the Houthis is a whole new ball game that risks blowing apart Russia's alliance with the Gulf Cooperation Council. Saudi Arabia's holding pattern regarding BRICS accession coupled with Crown Prince MbS' no-show at the Kazan Summit last week suggests fault lines are already emerging.

Saudi-Russia ties under the Biden administration have been on overdrive. The two OPEC+ heavyweights famously colluded in December 2022 to slash oil output by 2 million barrels a day and send crude prices soaring in defiance of Washington's wishes. Riyadh also threatened to sell off its European debt holdings if the G7 went ahead with plans to seize $300 billion in frozen Russian assets while Saudi investment company Kingdom Holding plowed over $500 million into Gazprom, Rosneft and Lukoil when the Ukraine conflict began. Yet, Russia's decision to equip the Houthis with satellite data with Donald Trump's potential re-election looming ahead could turn this thriving partnership on its head.

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As signatories to the Abraham Accords which host United States Central Command's Al Dharfa Air Base and the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet respectively, the UAE and Bahrain will be considered fair game by the Islamic Republic's foot soldiers should the shadow war between Israel and Iran spiral out of control. Whereas the Bahrainis have painted an even bolder target on their backs by agreeing to be part of Operation Prosperity Guardian, Russia has much more to lose if instability arises in the Emirates. Besides bilateral trade tripling to $7 billion during the last three years, Dubai has positioned itself as a welcoming hub" for sanctioned oligarchs no longer welcome in legacy Western capitals as well as white-collar Russians employed by

multinational firms.

Notwithstanding the GCC states' continued willingness to invest in Russia, facilitating exchanges via mutual visa waivers and sending high-level delegations to flagship annual events like the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, Putin appears prepared to sacrifice a profitable relationship with moderate Arab nations on the altar of burying Pax-Americana. Apart from their vast pool of battle-hardened manpower equally gung-ho about ending Western hegemony and paving the way for a more balanced world order, the Houthis – proscribed terrorist organization by the U.S. – do not present any real value proposition to Moscow.

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