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THE STRATEGIC NEXUS BETWEEN AL-SHABAAB AND THE HOUTHIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION AND GLOBAL SECURITY



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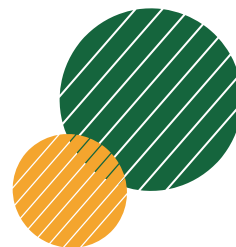




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TABLE OF CONTENTS



1.0 Executive Summary	5
2.0 Methodology	7
2.1 Baseline	7
3.0 Historical connection between Al-Qaeda and Al Shabaab: Origins, Expansion and Internal Conflicts (1991–2025)	8
4.0 Al-Shabaab: the start of collaboration beyond Jihadist Salafism and strategic Separation from Al-Qaeda	11
5.0 Contextualising the Nexus Between al-Shabaab and the Houthis	14
5.1 The Growth of the Relationship	16
5.2 The Structure of the Relationship	16
5.3 Key individuals shaping the Al-Shabaab – Houthi Cooperation	17
6.0 What Has Transpired to Date?	19
6.1 Overview	19
6.2 Exchange of Materials	19
6.3 Monetary Transaction	20
6.4 Training and Technical Exchange	20
6.5 Collaborative Operations	21
7.0 Al-Shabaab’s Motivations	22
7.1 Risks and Challenges Confronting Al-Shabaab	24
9.0 Strategic Motivations of the Houthis	24
9.1 How the cooperation is administered	26
9.2 Risks Pertaining to the Houthi Alliance	26
10.0 Al-Shabaab, AQAP and Houthis: conflict and cooperation	27
10.1 The Connection Between Al-Shabaab and AQAP: Historical Context and Current Dynamics	27
10.2 Distinctions Between Al-Shabaab and AQAP	28



10.3 AQAP and the Houthis	29
10.4 Triangulation of Al-Shabaab, AQAP and Houthis	29
11.0 Potential Evolution of Cooperation	30
11.1 Limitations	31
11.2 Future Scenarios	31
12.0 Implications of the Nexus	32
12.1 Implications for Regional Security	33
12.2 Global outlook	33
12.3 Implications Within the Organisation	33
12.4 Geostrategic Consequences	34
13.0 Recommendations	35
13.1 The Strategic End State	37



Executive Summary

This paper provides an in-depth insight into the strategic relationship, including cooperation, between Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen in Somalia and Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthis, in Yemen. It delves into the origins of the partnership, examines the nature and maturity of the relationship, and analyses the wider consequences for regional and global security. This paper, whilst acknowledging the limited research conducted previously, offers fresh analysis, aided by the Saldhig Institute's (SI) extensive networks in Somalia and Yemen, specifically, and in the Horn of Africa more broadly.

From al-Shabaab's viewpoint, Yemen constitutes a vital external support hub. It provides access to weapons, ammunition, and related materiel, training opportunities, and maritime networks that are more difficult to obtain elsewhere. The Houthis, by contrast, view Somalia as an opportunity to alleviate the burdens of economic isolation and to avoid international sanctions. Their collaboration is thus motivated more by pragmatic factors, such as illegal commerce, joint logistics, and maritime intelligence, than by ideology. In this symbiotic collaboration, the Houthis provide equipment, technical proficiency, and knowledge, while Al-Shabaab ensures secure transit routes, financial transactions and covert commercial links.

For al-Shabaab, this relationship is vital to maintaining its finances and military strength; for the Houthis, it is key to expanding their influence beyond the Horn of Africa and across the Red Sea. Concurrently, substantial risk remains inherent to the partnership for both parties. The partnership is exposed to profound sectarian divisions between Shiite and Sunni factions, infiltration, and the potential for more and more targeted sanctions.

Al-Qaeda, as a major actor in the Arabian Peninsula, has benefited from the al-Shabaab-Houthi nexus. Al-Shabaab has essentially become a go-between, or a hub, for the two factions that would otherwise be ideologically opposed to one another. As the Gaza conflict escalates, and instability in Yemen and competition for hegemony in the Red Sea intensify, it is likely that this cooperation will soon consolidate and expand. Importantly, in this relationship, pragmatism is the key.

This cooperation is advantageous for al-Shabaab as it provides opportunities to strengthen its operational capability whilst gaining increased access and influence in the region. At the global level, it adds threats to commercial shipping and energy supplies transiting the Red Sea. It may also disturb the internal balance within the wider Al-Qaeda network and present Iran with an indirect conduit to enhance and consolidate its influence in Africa.



In response, the report recommends that Somalia and neighbouring states, and de facto the international partners, significantly enhance maritime intelligence cooperation and crack down on the shadow economies that finance al-Shabaab. International partners have an important role to play, for example, in undertaking joint programs aimed at reducing local support for violent extremist groups and sharing better intelligence. At the regional level, organisations such as the Arab League and the African Union are urged to develop a coordinated strategy to help safeguard Red Sea security and contain the evolving Houthi–Al-Shabaab nexus.

Overall, therefore, the connection between the Houthis and Al-Shabaab is best seen as a pragmatic partnership structured around shared goals and underpinned by survival and strategy. While favourable to both factions in the short term, it presents a major - and increasing - challenge to Somalia's stability, regional security, and the safety of key global trade routes.

Methodology

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the strategic, political, and economic link between the Houthi movement in Yemen and Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The paper employs a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research relies on validated data, including, but not limited to, weapons trafficking and financial connections, derived from available reports and international and multilateral monitoring. Qualitative data were obtained from high-level intelligence sources and from interviews with security officials working in the maritime and counter-terrorism spaces in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. The study encountered limited constraints, including ethical considerations that prevented the Saldhig Institute (SI) from fully disclosing sensitive information for security reasons.

Baseline

Saldhig Institute acknowledges the publications to date that have attempted to deconstruct the alleged emerging partnership between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis. Despite the increasing number of literature that is being produced on the al-Shabaab – Houthi nexus, there's a broad consensus that it is difficult to verify the actual claims¹ (ISS, 2026) The partnership is characterised as a “growing collaboration” – describing the strategic benefits both groups will acquire (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025)².

Others view the partnership strictly through Iran's foreign policy objectives, underlying that Houthis expansion in the Horn of Africa is a “symptom of Iran's engagement” in the African Horn (Carnegie Endowment, 2025)³, whilst others frame the partnership as one-sided, driven by Houthi expansion purely to create a formidable “network of resistance⁴” (Rusi, 2024).

Yet very little analysis has been produced to develop a deep understanding of al-Shabaab's motivations, and that itself should be rooted in historical analysis that the Saldhig Institute can offer. It also offers insight into the extent, depth, risks, and potentialities of how the partnership can evolve between two groups, as well as its implications for Somalia and the Horn at large.

While this analysis is grounded in developments through late 2025, the evolving geopolitical landscape particularly the shifting roles of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen and the broader Red Sea underscores the need for a dynamic understanding of these relationships. The paper's findings remain critically relevant but must be interpreted in light of ongoing realignments in regional influence and security partnerships.

1 International Institute for Strategic Studies (2026) 'Lawless Seas, Contested Shores – Piracy, Smuggling and the Scramble for Port Access in the Horn of Africa.

2 Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2025) 'Expanding Al-Shabaab-Houthi Ties Escalate Security Threats to Red Sea Region.

3 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2025) 'Dhows, Drones and Dollars: Ansar Allah's Expansion into Somalia.

4 RUSI (2024) 'Beyond the Axis: Yemen's Houth



Historical connection between Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab: Origins, Expansion and Internal Conflicts (1991–2025)

Following the collapse of the government in 1991, Al-Qaeda viewed Somalia not just as an ungoverned territory, but rather as a strategic conduit to East Africa, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Peninsula – all areas linked to the world’s most significant maritime commerce routes. Interactions between Al-Qaeda and Somali Islamists began in 1991 via covert meetings along the Kenyan border and Lower Jubba, where Hassan Turki was leading a number of extremists. During this timeframe, prominent Al-Qaeda officials infiltrated Somalia, such as Abu Hafs al-Misri, Abu Talha al-Sudani, Salah Nabhan, Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Mohammed Fazul Abdullah. They were sent to establish networks, evaluate the security landscape, instruct local combatants and determine whether Somalia might ultimately serve as a frontline for operations against the United States and its interests⁵.

UNISOM’s deployment in late 1992 was seen as a Western incursion into Muslim territories. Operatives like Abu Talha al-Sudani, Salah Nabhan, Abu Hafs, and Abu Muhammad al-Masri incited Somali groups to oppose foreign troops through violent conflict. Training programs focused on offensive operations and the usage of explosives were developed by veterans who had experienced training and fighting in Afghanistan. Numerous accounts also contend that Al-Qaeda-affiliated operatives significantly contributed to assaults on U.S forces in Somalia⁶, notable the fall of the Black Hawk Down in 1993. This incident became pivotal to Al-Qaeda’s narrative portraying the United States as a “soft enemy” who is prone to retreat when faced with considerable casualties.

In the 1990s, several notable Somali extremists left Somalia to engage in fighting in Afghanistan and Kashmir, where Al-Qaeda networks were operational. Upon the cessation of those conflicts, several individuals returned to Somalia possessing combat experience, proficiency in explosives, and enhanced affiliations with Al-Qaeda’s global network. Al-Qaeda saw Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI), the first armed Somali organisation to adopt a global jihadist ideology, as an essential conduit into Somali society and endorsed training camps in regions such as Bu’aale, sections of Bari, Gedo and Ras Kamboni. These camps subsequently affiliated with Al-Shabaab upon its inception.

⁵ Anatomy of Terrorist Attack: In-Depth Investigation Into the 1998 Bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Matthew B. Ridgway Center for Security Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 2005.

⁶ Ibid.

In 2006, when the Islamic Courts Union established dominance over South Central Somalia, the most operationally engaged faction inside the Courts' military apparatus subsequently became recognised as Al-Shabaab. This represented a fresh opportunity for Al-Qaeda. Individuals like Abu Talha al-Sudani and Mohammed Fazul Abdullah offered substantial assistance such as training, counsel, and resources – motivated by the aspiration to transform Somalia into a significant jihadist stronghold akin to Afghanistan⁷.

In 2009, the establishment of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) benefited Al-Shabaab by facilitating a more consistent route between Yemen and Somalia. Illicit maritime routes and smuggling networks enabled the transfer of combatants, armaments, and funds, especially along the eastern coast of Somalia and the western coast of Yemen. In addition to logistics, there was an interchange of technical knowledge and ideological reinforcement, particularly in the development of more complex vehicle-borne explosives and suicide operations than had been previously seen in Somalia.

However, the pace of cooperation between AQAP and al-Shabaab created internal competition⁸. Upon assuming the role of emir of Al-Shabaab, Ahmed Abdi Godane began an aggressive centralisation of power, aiming to make leadership decisions unassailable. Certain officials affiliated with Al-Qaeda's regional networks, like Fazul Abdullah, allegedly opposed Godane's methodology. Significant conflict accompanied Godane's reluctance to establish complete loyalty to Al-Qaeda until 2012. Fazul Abdullah, often characterised as Al-Qaeda's principal representative, was assassinated in 2011 while trying to navigate a security checkpoint near Mogadishu. A hard drive recovered contained important documents, including correspondence sent to Al-Qaeda's senior leadership. In the correspondence, Fazul vehemently condemned Godane, alleging that he sought to create a personal "kingdom" that diverged from the overarching framework of global jihad and that Godane was obstructing critical elements of Al-Qaeda's regional strategy, including two ideas that emerged as significant areas of dispute.

First, it was Godane's rejection of Al-Qaeda's strategy to foster a robust alliance with Eritrea to acquire substantial weaponry and political backing. Secondly, it was Godane's rejection of advice intended to entice Ethiopian soldiers deep into Somalia, either by provocation or coercion, that Al-Qaeda saw as a strategy to deplete Ethiopia militarily and undermine its strength, thereby facilitating the expansion of activities inside Ethiopia⁹.

⁷ Interview with one of key al-Shabaab's founders, November 2025.

⁸ ISS (2011), 'The Killing of Fazul Abdullah Mohammed in Somalia a blow to Al Shabaab'

⁹ Interview with Ahmed Godane's close associate, November 2025.



From Fazul's viewpoint, these measures were fundamentally crucial to establishing a sustainable jihadist capability in East Africa. Godane said that interaction with Eritrea may potentially reveal the organisation as politically compromised or associated with foreign interests. He also believed that confronting Addis Ababa would strain Al-Shabaab's administrative and military capability. Godane stated that Al-Shabaab must maintain complete autonomy, including over its combatants, territorial control, financial systems, judicial bodies, and governance frameworks, and should not be subject to external directives from outside Somalia¹⁰.

The ramifications of this particular conflict were significant. Al-Shabaab experienced internal fragmentation, prompting Godane to initiate operations against opposing leaders. The confrontations resulted in the assassination of notable individuals, including Ibrahim al-Afghani and Ma'allin Burhan, among others, in 2013. This ultimately resulted in Al-Shabaab's confidence and faith in Al-Qaeda being diminished. Whilst both groups' ideologies still align, there has been a clear divergence in their external strategies and broader political objectives in the region.

¹⁰ Ibid

Al-Shabaab: the start of collaboration beyond Jihadist Salafism and strategic Separation from Al-Qaeda

In subsequent years, Al-Shabaab's emerging association with Yemen's Houthi movement indicated that the organisation was moving beyond traditional Salafi-jihadist boundaries. While Al-Qaeda's senior leadership has had limited engagements indirectly with Iran, there's no concrete evidence that AQAP has established an alliance with the Houthis. This research demonstrates that Al-Shabaab has pragmatically collaborated with the Houthis, viewing the relationship as a means for trade, weapons acquisition and strategic advantage despite their ideological divergence. This exasperated AQAP and highlighted a wider truth: Al-Shabaab had evolved beyond an initial ideological endeavour; it increasingly operated as a political-military entity influenced by local interests and regional prospects.

From 2020 to 2025, the alliance between Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab persisted but remained fragile, sustained by historical affiliations but divided by distrust, strategic rivalry, and ambiguity over the future direction of jihadism in the region. Al-Qaeda regarded Al-Shabaab as its most effective affiliate in Africa. Al-Shabaab increasingly seemed to operate on its own terms, viewing external relationships as more transactional than hierarchical. Today, the organisation has pragmatically relied on a combination of religious rhetoric, jihad, clandestine business networks, the exploitation of clan grievances, and the forging of alliances with unexpected entities whenever it identifies a strategic advantage.

As Al-Shabaab's ideological initiative evolved, particularly after Godane's death and the ensuing leadership of Ahmed Diriye, which increasingly relied on domestic Somali resources, the group started a re-evaluation of its connections in response to changing global dynamics. Al-Qaeda no longer resembled the powerful organisation it was from around 2000 to 2011; AQAP lost significant territory and influence; ISIS first controlled regions of Syria and Iraq before experiencing major degradation; and new conflicts emerged in various areas of the Muslim world. Amid these transformations, Al-Shabaab persisted: it governed territory, levied taxes, delivered justice locally, profited from illicit initiatives, and increasingly regarded itself not as a subordinate franchise but as a local authority with its own strategic trajectory and influence.

An internal strategy argument arose from this context: Which is more advantageous, complete organisational autonomy paired with flexible relationships, or being constrained within a single global jihadist brand that incites international opposition to the group? This inquiry became pivotal to Al-Shabaab's leadership strategy, as it assessed challenges and opportunities, as well as potential foreign collaborations that might not only prolong



the group's existence but also make it even more relevant in the changing geopolitical landscape, particularly regarding Israeli and Gulf relations.

Simultaneously, Yemen's conflict escalated to its most violent phases, with the Houthis evolving from a seemingly limited movement into a formidable military entity characterised by sophisticated tactics, extensive networks, and a maritime-oriented strategy connected to global trade. They presented a contemporary illustration of how a non-state entity might attain sufficient strength to compel even governments to negotiate.

The leadership of Al-Shabaab learned from this transformation: if a Shia movement under significant duress could turn illegitimacy and isolation into sustained dominance, how might Al-Shabaab use similar strategies of networking and political adaptability to determine its own future? Consequently, the discreet alliance between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis intensified. It began as an exchange of information and maritime facilitation and subsequently evolved into logistical and technological collaboration. Certain mid-level Al-Shabaab operatives allegedly underwent training related to explosives and small unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), whilst the Houthis gained information and services pertinent to the Gulf of Aden and the vital maritime route connecting the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean¹¹.

As this collaboration deepened, Al-Qaeda's influence inside Al-Shabaab waned. The prior notion that Al-Qaeda was the "progenitor" of jihad now appears outdated. At this juncture, Al-Shabaab had developed administrative structures, internal revenue streams, a rigorous repressive apparatus and enhanced military and intelligence capabilities. It no longer seemed to require a brand associated with Afghanistan; it increasingly sought to establish itself as a force in the Horn of Africa through varied yet adaptable connections¹².

Certain individuals affiliated with Al-Shabaab's leadership started to perceive that dissociating from Al-Qaeda could facilitate a potential "regional guarantee". Ostensibly, the group wanted to portray itself not merely as a global jihadist entity but as a Somali organisation grounded in regional interests, capable of collaborating with various partners as needed. This transition, however, would not be disclosed suddenly. An abrupt rupture may well have precipitated internal disintegration or civil conflict¹³. The preference was, and remains, one of gradual normalisation of the new ideology until it becomes internally acceptable.

This novel methodology is based on three principal pillars: political autonomy from Al-Qaeda; adaptable ties aligned with Somalia's prospective political destiny; and military capability that is not reliant merely on foreign training and resources. The association with the Houthis strengthens these foundations by promoting a notion of jihad that is less dependent on a singular global hierarchy and is more flexible.

11 AS official in Jilib District, October 2025.

12 Ibid.

13 Senior AS Commander, October 2025.

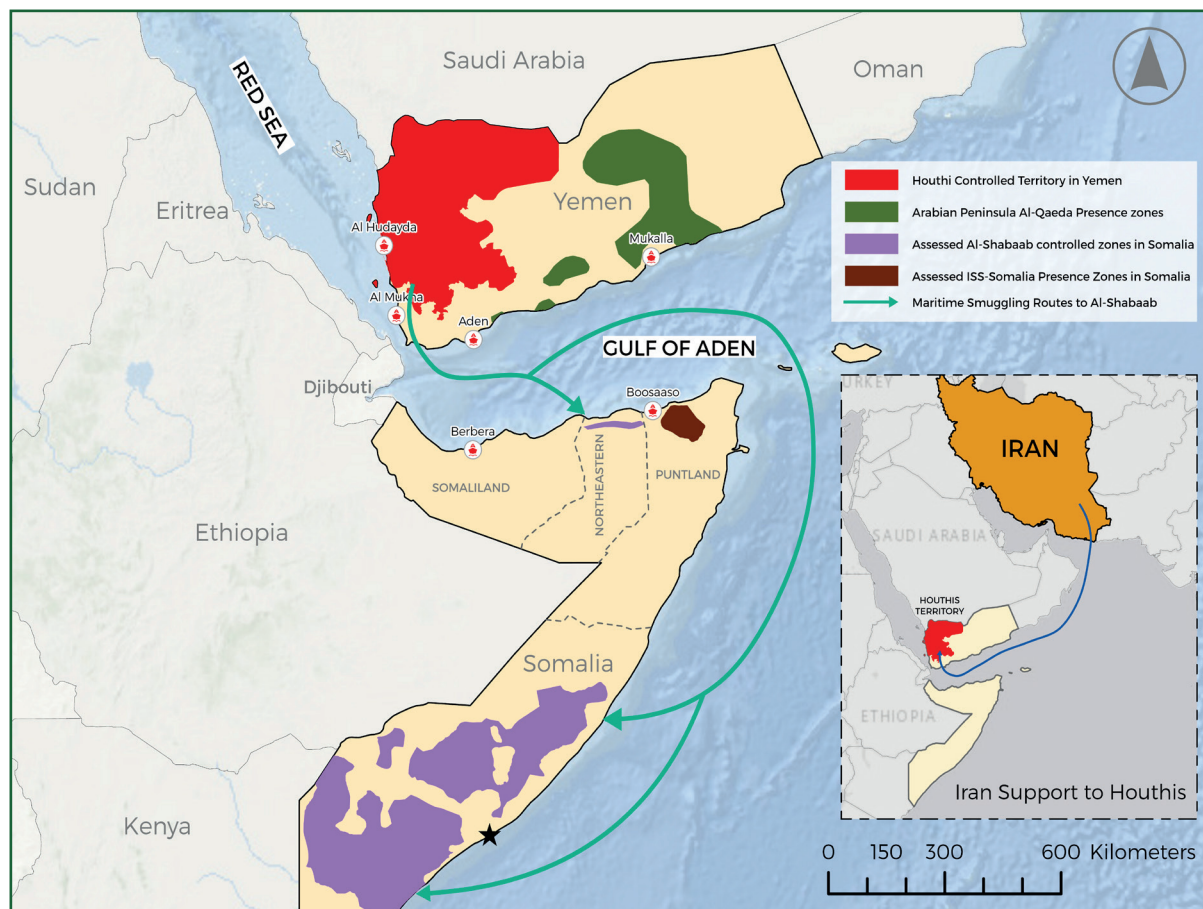


This method holds significant risk. Internally, extremist elements persist in seeing Al-Qaeda as a source of Islamic authority. An inadequately or immaturely handled split may result in disintegration or the emergence of a more radical offshoot group, akin to the manner in which ISIS diverged from prior jihadist networks in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, West Africa and Somalia. Externally, dissociating from Al-Qaeda would not inherently make Al-Shabaab acceptable or mitigate its classification as a terrorist group. The international world may see the transition as a dual threat—combining Salafi-jihadism with pragmatic insurgency governance, potentially inciting fresh military and intelligence operations by regional powers and Western allies.

Ultimately, Al-Shabaab's strategic decisions seem to be informed by a fundamental political principle that the organisation comprehends: rigid entities are prone to failure, whereas flexible ones often endure in many forms. If the Al-Qaeda designation constrains the organisation, it may facilitate a gradual dissociation while maintaining the networks and resources it previously provided. Should the Houthi connection fail to meet the group's requirements, and internal revenue proves adequate, Al-Shabaab may opt for a path of near-total autonomy while leaving unresolved the paramount question: does it ultimately aspire to remain affiliated with a transnational extremist agenda, or should it transform into a shadow-state model akin to the Taliban?

Al-Shabaab is currently entering a phase of brand development. It represents a local authority with global impact, flexible foreign alliances, and a will to withstand a prolonged conflict. Al-Shabaab's disengagement from Al-Qaeda is unlikely to manifest as an abrupt rebranding. More likely, the transition will start in language and symbolism. The group may progressively diminish references to "the global community" while promoting Somali-specific slogans focused on governance, taxation, justice, and "national defence." This rhetorical shift could eventually foster a narrative that characterises its conflict as a domestic political struggle rather than an extension of a global network.

Contextualising the Nexus Between al-Shabaab and the Houthis



The linkage between al-Shabaab and the Houthis has occasionally been portrayed as a modern development. It is, in fact, rooted in historical and geographical linkages. The two organisations operate in countries located on opposite sides of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, a geographic configuration that has historically facilitated trade and migration. As such, it is important to situate the Al-Shabaab – Houthi nexus within the broader historical context between Somalia and Yemen. The persistent political instability and civil unrest in both countries have generated security voids that armed non-state actors have leveraged to develop cross-border networks beyond the reach of legitimate government authorities.

Since its emergence from the remnants of the Islamic Courts Union in 2006, Al-Shabaab viewed Yemen as a strategic conduit that enhances the group's operational sustainability and growth. This included discreet access that enhanced Al-Shabaab's operational and logistical capabilities, facilitated increased cooperation with transnational jihadist groups, and established maritime smuggling corridors across the Red Sea, including routes between Northern and Eastern Somalia to Mukalla and Hodeidah. This was first identified by the Hiraal Institute in 2021¹⁴, which reported that Yemen is a critical operational base for Al-Shabaab to sustain and expand its operational and administrative capabilities.

¹⁴ Hiraal Institute has been replaced by Saldhig Institute (SI).

The onset of Yemen's civil conflict in 2014-2015 intensified this connection, as well as the change in leadership inside Al-Shabaab in 2014. Whilst Al-Shabaab exploited Yemen's deteriorating security to seek new streams of financial avenues and circumvent international sanctions, its new leadership also gave importance to establishing links with anti-Western entities, irrespective of sectarian distinctions. The group had strengthened ties with Arab and Somali business sectors, using commercial links as a front for logistical and financial activities, using individuals embedded inside Islamic business and social networks. The Saldhig Institute reports that discreet connections have been established between Al-Shabaab and businessmen affiliated with the Houthis¹⁵. The affiliated businessmen facilitate Al-Shabaab's transfer of goods, cash, and other contraband. These transactions underscore the pragmatic nature of the cooperation, driven primarily by a convergence of interests rather than ideological conformity. Through Saldhig Institute's interactions with Houthi-affiliated businessmen¹⁶, Somalia is seen as a regional hub for enhancing their regional leverage and influence.

Conversely, the driving force is Iran, which has always regarded the Horn of Africa, particularly Somalia, as a region of strategic importance for enhancing its political and ideological influence. Iran has deployed a soft power approach to win hearts and minds of Muslim-majority governments across Africa through humanitarian assistance, favourable but covert business opportunities and religious outreach. This has enabled Tehran to exert influence over the local Muslim populous without upsetting other regional adversaries. As such, Iran views Jihadi groups in Africa, including Al-Shabaab, as potential conduits to further its regional ambitions.

Despite their strict adherence to Sunni ideology, their cooperation with Iran and their proxies may inadvertently achieve Iran's broader objectives - to diminish the dominance of the Gulf in Africa

The connection between the Houthis and Al-Shabaab, although complex and mostly indirect, illustrates a broader Iranian strategy to use instability in Yemen and Somalia to undermine Western and Gulf state dominance along the Red Sea's shores.

¹⁵ Interviews with Somali businessmen in Sana'a, November 2025.

¹⁶ Ibid,

¹⁷ Ibid,



The Growth of the Relationship

Saldhig Institute assesses that the cooperation between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis grew incrementally in distinct phases¹⁷. The first phase began with Somali businesses linked to Al-Shabaab. They initiated engagement with Yemeni businessmen affiliated with the Houthis, who have significant investments in the fuel and weapons sectors. The second phase progressed to intelligence cooperation. As commercial contacts deepened, Al-Shabaab and the Houthis began covertly sharing security-related information, including details on US military activities, NATO naval operations, and exercises¹⁸.

The third phase included political and military cooperation. This phase purportedly included joint planning, the exchange of soldiers, military training and the supply of specialised equipment. Intelligence reports indicate that Al-Shabaab operatives were sent to Yemen for training by individuals linked to Iran or operating under Iranian influence. Houthi operatives have journeyed to the Galgala highlands in Somalia, where they received training in the asymmetric and infiltration tactics often used by Al-Shabaab against African Union and Somali National Army facilities.

The Structure of the Relationship

The partnership between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis is not formalised via written contracts or public declarations. It is based on informal accords and intelligence cooperation driven by shared objectives. Saldhig Institute asserts that it operates on three interconnected levels¹⁹. Independent businessmen affiliated with both Al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Houthis in Yemen oversee the commercial transport of goods. At the intelligence and training level, operatives from both groups engage in information sharing and capabilities development.

At the political and military echelons, those affiliated with Iran and the top leadership of Al-Qaeda play a crucial role. This enables engagement between the two groups to maintain functionality and reliability, while also complicating efforts to track their activities. Whilst key identities remain classified, several intelligence sources have suggested that numerous members of both the Houthis and Al-Shabaab have been specifically tasked with accelerating and deepening cooperation.

¹⁸ Houthi official, Sana'a, December 2025.

¹⁹ Interviews with Senior Al-Shabaab and Houthi Official, December 2025



Key individuals shaping the Al-Shabaab – Houthi Cooperation

Houthis²⁰



**1. Abdiwahid Naaji
Mohamed Abu Raas**

- Head of External Cooperation and International Development
- Direct selection from Tehran, specific duties include coordinating foreign operations in Iran, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Kenya, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Gaza.



**2. Hassan Ahmed Al-
Kahlaani "Abu Shahiid"**

- Head of Houthi's External Intelligence
- Key experiences include being a senior commander in 2014 when Sanca was captured, as well as the assassination of Ali Abdallah Saalah.



**3. Ad-Ham Humeyd Abdallah
Al Cifaari "Abu Khaliil"**

- Senior Intelligence Officer for the Houthis.
- He oversees the special file on personnel who hail from Africa who live in Yemen. He is the key link between the Houthis and Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan and Djibouti, overseeing training and integration into Houthi military and intelligence forces.



**4. Osama Hassan Ahmed
Al-Makhadi "Abu Shahiid"**

- Senior Intelligence Officer, and is in charge of Houthi's cooperation with al-Shabaab.
- He focuses on building and establishing networks with the youth, uluma, businessmen and politicians who can be used to further Houthi's agenda in Somalia.



**5. Hassan Ali Amir Al
Miraani**

- Senior Intelligence Officer and Head of Houthi's internal intelligence.
- However, documents obtained by Saldhig indicate that he is involved with Osama Hassan Ahmed Al-Makhadi and engages directly with Al-Shabaab on strategic matters.



**6. Col. Abu Haydar
Al-Qaxuum**

- Senior Intelligence officer who works closely with Al Miraani.
- Leads cooperation with AQ in East and West Africa, as well as conducting external operations for the Houthis. Al-Qaxuum has also direct links with al-Shabaab.



Key individuals shaping the Al-Shabaab – Houthi Cooperation

Al-Shabaab²¹



1. Abubakar Ali Aden

- Deputy Emir of Al-Shabaab.
- Chairman of the coordination committee of the two groups



2. Yasin Osman Kilwe

- Responsible for Al-Shabaab's military, intelligence, financial, and political files in Puntland.
- He is a key member of the AS-Houthi Committee. Along with Battar (recently killed by a US drone strike), both were influential in shaping engagements with the Houthis. In early 2025, Kilwe hosted a senior Houthi delegation in the Galgala Mountains, where they received training and were then taken to Jilib.



3. Abdullahi Tahlil Hirey (Jeeri)

Head of Al-Shabaab's Weapons

Main responsibilities include procuring weapons and human smuggling.



4. Mohamed Nur Jama (Malaq)

- Head of Jabha in Puntland

- Acts a key player in maintaining Houthi cooperation.

²¹ Al-Shabaab Official, Jilib, December 2025.

What Has Transpired to Date?

Overview

Since the establishment of the link between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis in late 2015, there has been increasing evidence that the two organisations have progressed beyond mere contact to operational and financial collaboration. Recent developments noted since February 2024 indicate that this connection has several dimensions. These include, but are not limited to, arms transfers, financial support, military capacity building, joint intelligence operations, and monitoring along the Red Sea coastline and in the airspace of both Somalia and Yemen. The data indicates that the Al-Shabaab–Houthi relationship has transcended beyond mere informal transactions; it has transformed into an operational strategic network aimed at promoting the interests of both parties.

Exchange of Materials

Credible sources have verified that small boats from Yemeni ports, including Hodeidah, Al-Mukha, and Ras Issa, have consistently transported arms to the northern, eastern, and southern shores of Somalia. The alleged weaponry includes assault rifles, heavy machine guns, grenades, landmines, components for improvised explosive devices, light mortars and rocket-propelled grenades²². Intelligence reports indicate numerous occurrences of vessels seized in the Red Sea with weaponry sourced from Yemen intended for Somalia. Although many shipments were confiscated, others reportedly arrived in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas undetected.

The Houthis have provided technological knowledge to Al-Shabaab, such as improvised explosive devices and the deployment of inexpensive drones²³. Numerous operations executed by Al-Shabaab in Mogadishu and Jubbaland have allegedly used strategies adopted from Yemeni combat zones. An assault executed earlier this month on Kismayo airport was verified to have used drones that Al-Shabaab had just obtained from Houthi-associated networks in Yemen²⁴.

Traders have been pivotal in enabling these movements. Both Somali and Yemeni businessmen have used fishing companies and other legitimate commercial companies as cover to transport arms and equipment²⁵. Whilst this is the preferred mode of delivery, there have been instances in which small vessels have directly supplied guns to coastal regions accessible to al-Shabaab.

22 Al-Shabaab Commander in Puntland, November 2025.

23 Houthi Intelligence Official, San'a, November 2025

24 U.S State Department, Reward for Justice, press release, January 2026.

25 Houthi official, Hudaydah Port, November 2025.



Monetary Transaction

Financial collaboration has been another essential foundation of the partnership. Al-Shabaab reportedly exploits money-laundering networks spanning Yemen, Oman and Djibouti, but the Houthis depend on obscure financial systems to finance their activities without drawing international attention. Both parties are said to extensively use informal remittance channels, notably hawala networks functioning in Bosaso, Djibouti, and Sana'a.²⁶ Gold and U.S. dollars are used in illicit transactions involving charcoal and fuel, with commercial institutions overseas sometimes manipulated by intermediaries to facilitate cross-border financial transfers.

There is also evidence of collaborative or overlapping investments. The Houthis are reported to have invested in numerous enterprises in Somalia, particularly in the extractive industry²⁷. In April 2024, Al-Shabaab established an office responsible for mineral resources which operates around Southern and Central Somalia to undertake exploration and extraction activities. Recent expenditures include the procurement of small watercraft and fishing vessels, as well as the establishment of a dedicated maritime and coastal intelligence section within Al-Shabaab. Saldhig Institute identified undisclosed commercial businesses set up as channels for money laundering and business ventures linked to Al-Shabaab²⁸.

Joint business ventures between the two groups also extend to the fishing industry, the joint procurement of ageing boats used for the delivery of weapons, and the recruitment of social media influencers and local media outlets to favourably skew narratives and messages for both groups. Intelligence reports indicate that these investments aim to strengthen the connection by establishing robust economic interdependence between the entities.

Training and Technical Exchange

The collaboration in training has intensified the bond. Al-Shabaab militants have received training in sophisticated explosives, ground defense and urban warfare tactics, as well as drone strike methodologies²⁹. The training sessions were conducted by Houthi officials and Iranian experts, namely in the Sa'dah and Amran districts of northern Yemen.

26 Interviews with al-Shabaab and Houthi officials involved in overseeing financial transactions, November 2025, Bossaso, Jilib and Sana'a.

27 Verifiable documentation obtained showing Houthi investments in Somalia. 28 U.S State Department, Reward for Justice, press release, January 2026.

28 Interview with Al-Shabaab affiliated businessman, December 2025.

29 Al-Shabaab Commander who received training, December 2025.



Concurrently, Al-Shabaab has conducted training in Somalia focused on ground fighting and internal intelligence activities³⁰. Yemeni nationals associated with the Houthis have received training in asymmetric warfare methods in which Al-Shabaab have considerable expertise and experience. This exchange encompasses technical skills, including the maintenance of weapons and explosives, the fabrication of naval mines, and the administration of decentralised intelligence systems whereby cells function autonomously while disseminating vital information across the network.

Collaborative Operations

While definitive evidence of coordinated attacks by both entities has not emerged, many sources claim that the two groups have cooperated on maritime security operations and reconnaissance³¹. The claims are supported by data released by the US Africa Command in 2022, which recorded sightings of suspicious vessels linked to networks associated with both Al-Shabaab and the Houthis. Al-Shabaab has supplied intelligence on marine operations along Somalia's coastline, whilst the Houthis have disseminated information concerning Western naval and aircraft activities in the Red Sea.³² This discreet collaboration appears to focus primarily on securing smuggling routes for arms and fuel, endeavours that confer considerable economic advantage on both factions. The two parties now exchange armaments, financial assets, commercial ventures, knowledge transfer in both tech and combat instruction, and intelligence and marine surveillance capabilities. This collaboration has markedly enhanced the operational capabilities of both entities but has compromised security across the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. The Al-Shabaab–Houthi cooperation is becoming an increasingly regional threat, with a stark shift towards limited tactical cooperation.

30 Ibid.

31 Undisclosed Intelligence Agency, December 2025.

32 Senior Houthi Intelligence Official, December 2025.



Al-Shabaab's Motivations

The procurement of weapons and related materiel is a key driver of al-Shabaab³³'s operations. Yemen continues to be a transit hub for illicit weapons intended, inter alia, for Somalia. In addition, the supply of advanced weaponry by Iran to the Houthis makes Yemen an attractive destination for Al-Shabaab to “shop” for a variety of weapons including longer-range missiles used in naval operations and attacks outside Yemen, as well as explosive materials, improvised explosive devices and both short and long-range drones. If Al-Shabaab were to obtain even minor quantities of this technology, its ability to sustain resistance against the Somali government and international peacekeeping forces under AUSSOM would be significantly augmented.

Second, the protection of maritime routes and the deterrence of illicit trade is key³⁴. Al-Shabaab has access to most areas of Somalia's coastline, particularly in the southern and central regions. Partnership with the Houthis strengthens the group's capability to protect smuggling and illegal trade corridors against international naval forces. This relationship allows both sides to benefit from shared maritime information and mutual security agreements.

Third, as both Al-Shabaab and the Houthis are under international sanctions, it is leading them to seek other avenues for money laundering and covert investment³⁵. Their association facilitates Al-Shabaab's ability to transfer and deposit funds in countries such as Yemen, Oman, and Sudan, where informal or unregulated money-transfer mechanisms exist. Al-Shabaab relies on businesses linked to familial or clan networks, with some registered in areas controlled by the Somali government and others in Yemen.

These agreements enable the organisation to sustain its administrative and operational machinery.

By cooperating with the Houthis, Al-Shabaab seeks to secure indirect protection against external military pressure. It aims to get technical and political assistance from Iran or its associated networks³⁶, while enhancing its reputation as an organisation capable of operating outside Somalia's borders.

Despite deep-rooted Sunni–Shia doctrinal divisions, Al-Shabaab leverages its association with the Houthis to enhance its religious status and jihadist legitimacy. The group identifies as a worldwide Muslim entity free from sectarian differences, a narrative that enhances its standing among jihadist factions. This position is particularly relevant when in competition with organisations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, who carefully monitor regional conflicts to assess influence, loyalty and recruitment prospects.

33 Al-Shabaab Official, Jilib, December 2025.

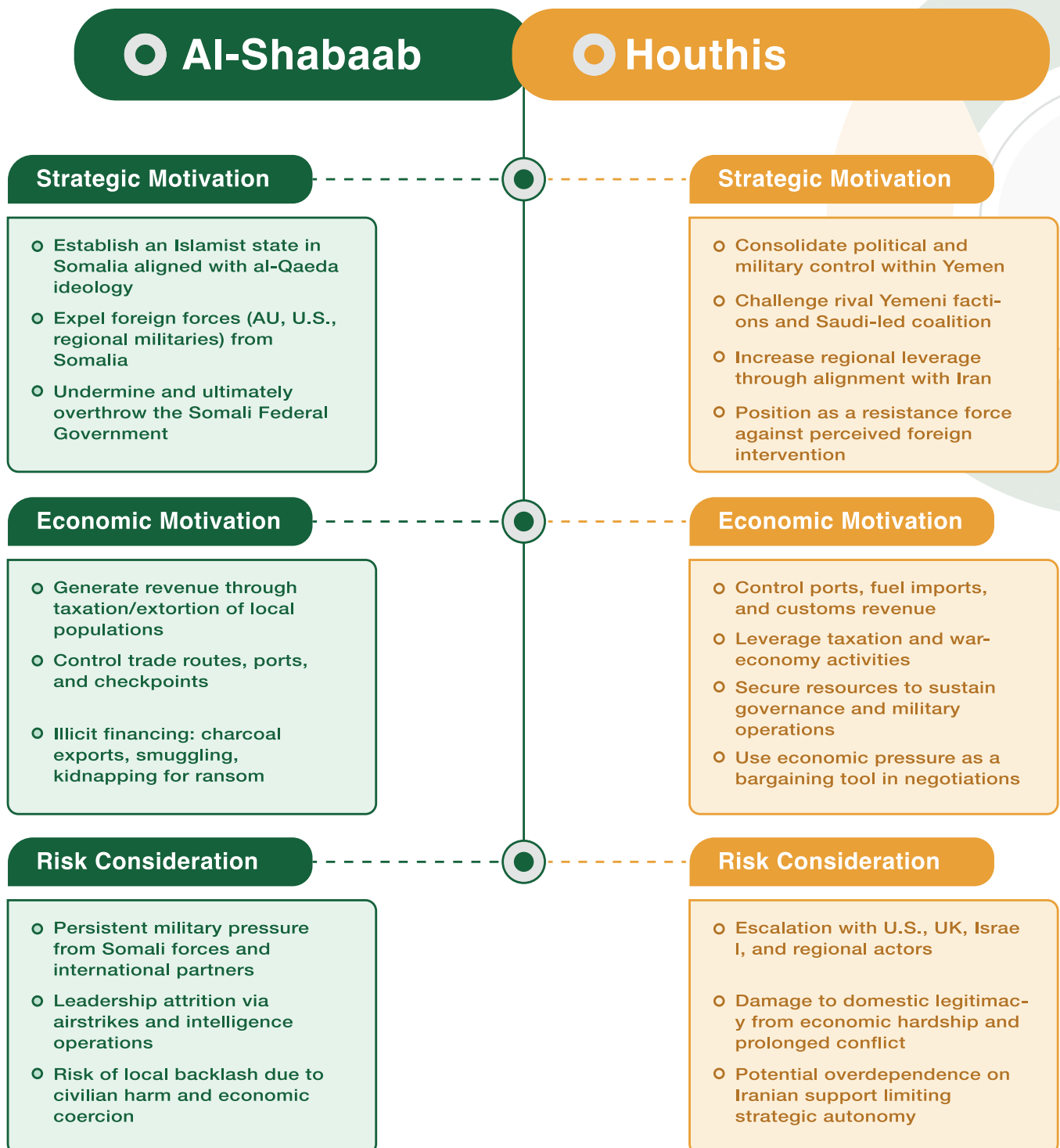
34 Ibid

35 Ibid

36 Undisclosed source, Tehran, November 2025.



AL-SHABAAB-HOUTHIS MOTIVATIONS





Risks and Challenges Confronting Al-Shabaab

Despite these advantages, Al-Shabaab is attuned to the risks associated with their alliance with the Houthis. Sectarian tensions are causing a major internal challenge, resulting in a doctrinal rift between Sunni and Shia Islam. A number of Al-Shabaab's hardline clerics are strongly opposed to any engagement with Shia groups³⁷, which indicates ideological fragmentation. Furthermore, strategic mistrust remains a substantial concern. The Houthis operate with varying degrees of autonomy, but their actions are consistently aligned with Iran's strategic goals, and this may cause further strains as al-Shabaab may conclude that the cooperation in the long-term better serves Tehran's interests³⁸.

Cooperation between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis can be described as being pragmatic and interest-driven. Religious ideology primarily serves as a political tool, although military and economic goals are increasingly paramount. The collaboration mitigates reduced external support from Al-Qaeda and diminishes its ability to raise funds locally in Somalia allowing Al-Shabaab to adapt and sustain itself.

Strategic Motivations of the Houthis

The Houthis govern large swathes of northern Yemen, including significant Red Sea ports, such as Hodeidah, as well as key supply routes on both land and with maritime connections. When the conflict began in 2015, the intensity of the fighting and sanctions necessitated the Houthis to “think outside the box”, adapt, identify new funding streams and establish covert logistical networks outside their national borders. The Houthis' external outreach to groups such as Al-Shabaab is shaped by a strategic assessment of opportunities and risks³⁹. The rationale is predicated on the strategic importance of the maritime routes between Somalia and Yemen, and on the need to mitigate the influence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with the aim of bolstering deterrence against Saudi- and Emirati-backed political opportunism in Yemen.

While this analysis is grounded in developments through late 2025, the evolving geopolitical landscape—particularly the shifting roles of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen and the broader Red Sea—underscores the need for a dynamic understanding of these relationships. The paper's findings remain critically relevant but must be interpreted in light of ongoing realignments in regional influence and security partnerships.

This section examines the Houthis' aims in these contacts, the techniques used, the threats recognised, and their methods for risk mitigation.

37 Al-Shabaab Da'wa Official, Bu'ale, December 2025.

38 Al-Shabaab official, Jibil, December 2025.

39 Senior Houthi intelligence official, November 2025.

Geography is a key factor. Somalia and Yemen are located on either side of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and collaboration with networks operating along Somalia's coastline, particularly in regions lacking a robust central government, provides the Houthis with alternative routes for transporting supplies, fuel, or military equipment. These links also improve marine situational awareness. The Houthis receive intelligence on maritime movements from Al-Shabaab's networks along Somalia's maritime coast, thereby enhancing their capacity to mitigate risk and pursue opportunities in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden⁴⁰.

In addition, sanctions have brought economic pressure to the Houthis. Sanctions have curtailed the Houthis' access to normal markets, forcing them to seek alternative, illicit trade routes. Cooperation with Al-Shabaab has widened the market access for the Houthis⁴¹, facilitated the sale of fuel, weapons and ammunition, explosive components, drones and gold transactions through both informal and formal financial systems. This cooperation allows the Houthis to gain from high-return/low-risk financial activities that are difficult trace or monitor.

The cooperation also builds Houthi's deterrence capabilities⁴². Houthis' penetration, access and presence in Somalia strongly signal to Gulf adversaries and the United States that their capabilities transcend geographical boundaries. Such cooperation enables the Houthis to decentralise their military and intelligence structures and to strategically concentrate forces, thereby mitigating internal pressures.

The cooperation further strengthens Houthi technical and tactical capabilities in modern warfare. The dissemination of information regarding IEDs, naval mines, and drones strengthens the Houthis' operational capability. If local production or supply chains are disrupted, it can source from established regional partnerships⁴³. In some cases, as the Saldhig Institute reports, innovative technical concepts have been tested beyond Yemen's borders, including in Somalia, before being used within Yemen, thereby reducing risk and improving operational resilience and efficiency⁴⁴.

The cooperation also feeds its propaganda campaigns and consolidates the groups' external legitimacy. Its cooperation with the likes of Al-Shabaab supports the Houthis portrayal as anti-West and anti-Gulf. This depiction resonates particularly strongly with anti-West audiences and extremist groups.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Al-Shabaab Commander, Bu'ale, November 2025.



How the cooperation is administered

Private commercial networks, including intermediaries, front companies, and covert transactions, are used to move goods and resources, thereby complicating the traceability of Houthi and Al-Shabaab transactions. Intelligence and logistical cooperation focus on managing maritime commerce between Yemen and Somalia, identifying risks, and maintaining clandestine routes that are difficult to expose or monitor.

Technical cooperation between Houthis and Al-Shabaab has been reported to be selective and carefully governed. Data on weapons maintenance, drone modification, and improvised explosives is sent selectively to preserve secrecy and protect critical networks, often through third parties and local actors, which ensures obscurity with regard to direct links between senior leadership on both sides.

Risks Pertaining to the Houthi Alliance

Despite the obvious strategic benefits, the cooperation entails significant risk. One key risk reported was that, given al-Shabaab's designation under the targeted Sanctions regime, this designation may trigger further sanctions against the Houthis and increase the likelihood that international forces would seek to further degrade the Houthis if such cooperation is verified⁴⁵. This exposure may undermine the Houthis' political ambitions, resulting in diminished legitimacy and further economic isolation. The interception of vessels, bank records, or money-laundering tools may well collapse entire networks and expose their operational security protocols. The global regulation of hawala systems and gold markets in the region makes the Somalia–Yemen links especially vulnerable to trend identification⁴⁶.

Internal ideological risks also arise as collaboration with a Sunni jihadist movement may provoke division among the Houthis' Zaydi-Shia base or endanger relationships with other regional allies. The presence of AQAP as a direct adversary complicates the management of diverse relationships without provoking internal strife or operational setbacks. The Houthis are also cost-conscious, as extended maritime supply lines increase the risk of disruption, loss, and higher costs, while diverting attention from the core conflict in Yemen⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ Undisclosed Houthi source, November 2025.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.



Houthis' external operations have necessitated the group to take steps to mitigate the risks. Financial, logistical, and intelligence activities are divided into small, independent units to prevent the failure of one from compromising the administrative and operational systems of the Houthis⁴⁸. They depend heavily on local intermediaries to establish barriers between leadership and daily transactions. Whilst the Houthis are becoming increasingly reliant on gold, gemstones, cash transfers, and intricate hawala structures to obfuscate tracking efforts, they maintain plausible deniability by disseminating public messages that dissociate their leadership from illegal activities and ascribe such actions to autonomous business entities⁴⁹.

Al-Shabaab, AQAP and Houthis: conflict and cooperation

To deepen understanding of the relationship between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis, it is essential to first examine the role of AQAP, given that AQAP has been Al-Shabaab's closest ally. AQAP functions in Yemen, where it has engaged in combat against the Houthis for many years. The most notable incident was when AQAP successfully assassinated Badr al-Din al-Houthi, the founder and spiritual head of the Houthis. As of now, no official agreement exists between AQAP and the Houthis, despite a temporary cessation of their direct hostilities since the start of the Saudi-led coalition's extensive military campaign in Yemen. This situation verifies that the Houthis and AQAP continue to see each other as sworn enemies.

The Connection Between Al-Shabaab and AQAP: Historical Context and Current Dynamics

The association between Al-Shabaab and AQAP originated from 2007 to 2009, when Somali combatants went to Yemen to benefit from jihadist training by Al-Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate. In 2012, when Al-Shabaab officially solidified its alliance with Al-Qaeda after Ahmed Godane's vow of allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, AQAP emerged as Al-Shabaab's closest regional collaborator⁵⁰. The two factions possess a unified global jihadist ideology, interchange combatants, knowledge, and information, and see one another as secure refuges during times of duress including locations for escape, reorganization or training.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Al-Shabaab Founder, November 2025.



During a period of significant pressure on AQAP, Al-Shabaab allegedly allocated approximately 30 per cent of the extortion profits generated within Somalia to provide financial assistance to AQAP⁵¹. During that period, Al-Shabaab controlled around 10 regions in Somalia, affording it considerable economic influence. AQAP highly appreciated this assistance and, according to intelligence assessments, continues to rely on Al-Shabaab for financial support.

Sources verify that AQAP instructed Al-Shabaab operatives in explosives and bomb-making, digital security and encrypted communications⁵², as well as in executing intricate coordinated operations that integrate bombs with direct assaults. In exchange, Al-Shabaab provided financial assistance to AQAP and exchanged intelligence, especially details of Western military operations in the maritime areas around Somalia and the broader region.

Distinctions Between Al-Shabaab and AQAP

Notwithstanding their cooperation, significant strategic divergences persist that impact the existence of both organisations. A significant concern is the rivalry for leadership inside the larger Al-Qaeda network. In the absence of a public announcement on a new general leader by Al-Qaeda after the assassination of Ayman al-Zawahiri, both the Yemeni and Somali factions have been asserting their claims as the most genuine heirs to the central leadership.

Geographical and economic disparities exist between al-Shabaab and AQAP. AQAP has a relatively safe geographical sanctuary in Yemen; yet it faces financial difficulties, rendering it reliant on Somali assistance. Conversely, Al-Shabaab has robust financial sources via taxes and extortion inside Somalia; it lacks certain long-term sanctuaries in the event of significant military assaults.

A further significant distinction pertains to the Houthis. AQAP see the Houthis as heretical Shiites, whilst Al-Shabaab has engaged in a pragmatic alliance with them for financial profit and military logistics. This divide has incited internal discussions within the Al-Qaeda movement⁵³. Certain AQAP members have said that Al-Shabaab has forsaken Sunni jihadist beliefs; however, this perspective does not seem to be endorsed by AQAP's senior leadership, as shown by confidential communications between AQAP's new leadership and Al-Shabaab⁵⁴, which cannot be disclosed for security reasons.

51 Ibid.

52 Undisclosed sources affiliated with Al-Shabaab.

53 Al-Qaeda Official, East Africa, November 2025.

54 Undisclosed communication between AQ and Al-Shabaab obtained by Saldhig Institute, October 2025.

AQAP and the Houthis

The Houthis and AQAP have been in direct confrontation since 2010, when the Houthis launched an insurrection in Sa'dah.⁵⁵ AQAP views the Houthis as an Iranian proxy aiming to subvert Sunni ideology in Yemen, while the Houthis see AQAP as tool used by Saudi Arabia and the United States. From 2015 to 2020, the Houthis seized many areas where AQAP has historically had influence, including Al-Bayda, Ma'rib, and Abyan, among others⁵⁶. The growth was enabled by the significant setbacks AQAP experienced due to U.S. airstrikes that killed several top officials.

The Houthis' weakening of AQAP in Yemen resulted in a significant loss of AQAP's capacity to manage weapons-smuggling routes and money networks. This facilitated Al-Shabaab's establishment of direct connections with the Houthis, capitalising on the power vacuum. Gradually, Al-Shabaab redirected some of its attention from AQAP to certain economic and military logistical agreements with the Houthis⁵⁷. The Houthis used Al-Shabaab as a safer alternate route across the Red Sea.

Triangulation of Al-Shabaab, AQAP and Houthis

AQAP and Al-Shabaab are linked by ideology, training, and financial support. Al-Shabaab and the Houthis collaborate on strategy, commerce, intelligence and military supplies.⁵⁸ AQAP and the Houthis continue to be adversaries engaged in both ideological and military confrontation. Al-Shabaab positions itself as an informal intermediary between two antagonistic factions to take advantage of both⁵⁹. For example, Al-Shabaab utilises AQAP's proficiency in global jihad while concurrently exploiting Houthi access to weaponry and clandestine marine routes. Concurrently, it carefully conceals one link from another, protecting its support and tolerance from both sides.

AQAP may finally conclude that Al-Shabaab's affiliation with the Houthis represents a direct threat and classify it as an ideological betrayal, perhaps leading to - at the very least - reduced cooperation. The Houthis may see their affiliation with Al-Shabaab as temporary and may terminate it once they have achieved their immediate goals. Iran's active engagement may potentially alter the relationship in ways that do not benefit Al-Shabaab. If the connections among all three parties are definitively revealed, they may face increased international sanctions and synchronised military intervention.

55 Crisis Group (2014), The Houthis: From Saada to Sanaa

56 Ibid.

57 Senior Al-Shabaab official Galgala, November 2025.

58 Houthi official, Sana'a, November 2025.

59 Ibid.



Potential Evolution of Cooperation

Given the current regional dynamics, including the Red Sea conflict and the growing alliance between Iran and Russia, as well as an overall decline of Western military presence across Africa, it is clear that multiple factors may drive the Al-Shabaab–Houthi relationship towards increased strategic and economic cooperation. This section assesses how that cooperation may expand further, details the opportunities both sides could capitalise on, and highlights any resulting risks

The cooperation between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis has evolved through different phases as previously detailed. As of late 2025, local sources⁶⁰ indicate that the partnership has matured into a formal alliance, though it has been kept confidential. The cooperation is now advancing beyond fundamental logistical and intelligence coordination into political, media and direct military collaboration⁶¹.

Somalia's long coastline and inherent lack of maritime capabilities will be seen by the Houthis as an opportunity to exploit and expand their operations. Al-Shabaab remains a potent threat despite significant strides to degrade its operational capability. Diminished pressure from the Somali government and its partners, as well as the local militias, would immediately provide Al-Shabaab space to expand and consolidate its external networks and pursue its strategic priorities⁶². Strengthening collaboration with the Houthis will enable Al-Shabaab to circumvent both domestic and international isolation and concurrently mitigate the consequences of military setbacks and leadership decapitation.

Regional changes have also impacted the cooperation. Since 2023, the Houthis have conducted attacks on international ships in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden, justifying their actions in support of Palestinians and retaliation against Israel. Saldhig received reports that Al-Shabaab may be providing informational support to these maritime activities, driven by its ideological view of the Gaza war as a religious obligation⁶³. A lack of an integrated regional intelligence cooperation is exploited, enabling clandestine cooperation between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis to expand undetected.

A likely approach is improved logistical integration⁶⁴. The Houthis may acquire new smuggling routes via Somalia for weapons, fuel, gold, and pharmaceuticals, while Al-Shabaab might secure supplies and funding to sustain its conflict. Both sides may disguise these operations as fishing or commercial vessels to conceal their true intentions. In addition, both groups will likely deepen cooperation in the field of area intelligence and digital collaboration. The Houthis have sophisticated proficiency in drone operations, secure communications, and data security. Al-Shabaab may use this knowledge to enhance encrypted communications, deploy surveillance and attack drones, and perhaps implement marine suicide-boat strategies already proven by the Houthis.

60 Undisclosed sources based in Yemen, November 2025.

61 Ibid.

62 Federal Government Official, Mogadishu, November 2025.

63 Undisclosed intelligence sources, Sana'a and Mogadishu, December 2025.



Financial collaboration may also become more systematic. Both populations depend significantly on hawala systems and cash-centric economies. By legally integrating their systems, they might establish an integrated money-laundering network with low traceability, ensuring a consistent funding source for both parties. Political cooperation, albeit expected to stay clandestine, is another possibility. The Houthis intend to deepen political cooperation with prominent Al-Shabaab leaders to enhance their influence within Somalia.

Limitations

Expansion also has inherent risk. As collaboration intensifies, monitoring and intelligence scrutiny will likely increase. Maritime prohibitions, precision airstrikes, or the confiscation of arms consignments may destabilise the entire network, especially if resilience is lacking and the network can be exploited by others. Ideological disparities, for example, continue to be a significant limitation. The Sunni–Shiite schism may erode trust, and extremist factions within Al-Shabaab could see collaboration with the Houthis as theologically invalid, thereby inciting internal divisions.

Regional adversaries of the Houthis, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, may respond by increasing intelligence and military assistance to regional partners, with a particular focus on Al-Shabaab–Houthi networks. Iran’s engagement also entails hazards. Direct intervention by Tehran might diminish Al-Shabaab’s operational autonomy and compel it to make choices that conflict with its own objectives. Ultimately, should the alliance become more conspicuous, Al-Shabaab risks being categorised with Iran and the Houthis under extensive international sanctions, significantly undermining its financial and military capabilities.

Future Scenarios

A potential scenario is continuous growth, characterised by intensified arms trafficking and commercial relationships, the Houthis emerging as a dependable source of weaponry and technical/operational experience, and Al-Shabaab acquiring an additional pillar of military and financial backing. An alternative scenario is one in which collaboration between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis is more limited, with interactions confined to the procurement of weapons and the sharing of maritime intelligence, deliberately eschewing explicit political or military coordination.



A failure is also possible as significant international pressure or unresolvable ideological disagreements might undermine the partnership, compelling the Houthis to withdraw to Yemen and excluding Al-Shabaab from essential supply routes. A more hazardous alternative is proxy expansion, in which Iran or other groups use the link to create a vast jihadist-affiliated network between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, therefore significantly increasing regional and global security concerns. It remains unclear whether the recent decisive Saudi Arabia military intervention in Yemen, resulting in the withdrawal of the UAE, will motivate Riyadh to capitalise on the momentum to degrade the Houthis and preserve a unified Yemeni state under the internationally recognised government.

All evidence suggests that the relationship between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis is gradually evolving towards more strategic collaboration. Al-Shabaab views cooperation as important for its survival and expansion, for acquiring weaponry, and for sustaining its existence, whilst the Houthis want to avoid sanctions and maintain their regional supremacy.

Implications of the Nexus

The strategic alliance between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis has significant implications. Their operations on opposing sides of the Red Sea directly influence domestic security in Somalia, regional stability in the Horn of Africa, the security of global commerce, and the equilibrium of power among regional and international stakeholders. This section examines the implications of this link across four dimensions: inside Somalia, at the regional level, globally, and within the organisations themselves, namely Al-Qaeda and Iran.

At the national level, enhanced cooperation with the Houthis might significantly increase Al-Shabaab's financial resources and logistical capabilities. This may lead to a heightened incidence of attacks or the creation of novel forms of violence enabled by access to advanced weaponry through the use of sophisticated explosives and improvised devices inspired by techniques developed in Yemen. Its territorial dominance, especially in coastal areas, may increase, with a focus on the northeastern and northwestern regions. Such developments would likely coincide with intensified attacks in critical urban areas, aimed at demonstrating enduring might and undermining governmental efforts to stabilise the country.

The link may increase Al-Shabaab's involvement in illegal trade. Arms and fuel smuggling along Somalia's coastline may escalate, along with increasingly intricate money-laundering schemes and illicit market activities that support the organisation. Local businessmen affiliated with Al-Shabaab may have increased confidence as the circulation of commodities from Yemen becomes more streamlined. This would exacerbate the decline in state income while bolstering the group's parallel economy.



Implications for Regional Security

The partnership between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis at the regional level poses a substantial security threat to the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. The Red Sea functions as a crucial channel for international commerce, linking the interests of the United States, China, Europe, and Gulf countries. Houthi attacks on marine boats, combined with arms trafficking networks associated with Al-Shabaab, may threaten trade routes and increase global prices for petroleum and other goods.

The threat of coordinated maritime attacks is present, with Al-Shabaab providing intelligence from the African coastline and the Houthis contributing armaments and technical expertise. In the most extreme situation, direct combined operations may be conducted. Neighbouring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti will see heightened security pressure because of the increased influx of illicit weapons, heightened threats to critical commercial ports like Mombasa and Djibouti, and the transformation of Somali and Yemeni waterways into zones of persistent instability.

Global outlook

The growing cooperation between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis poses a risk to oil supplies, raw materials, and commercial ships transiting the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. It also jeopardises critical energy lines from the Gulf of Aden to Europe. Coordinated joint asymmetric assaults originating from Somalia and Yemen will significantly disrupt global trade, exacerbate inflation and inflict economic burdens extending far beyond the area.

The cooperation will also result in the emergence of a new phase of international jihadism. It may provide Al-Qaeda with an opportunity to revive its global reach. The Houthis' affiliation with Iran, Al-Shabaab's alignment with Al-Qaeda, and Iran's links to aspects of Al-Qaeda's senior leadership may foster an unprecedented cross-sectarian terrorist collaboration⁶⁵. The US government and its allies may see the Al-Shabaab–Houthi alliance as a dual danger to intensify its CT engagement, including increased airstrikes in Somalia and Yemen.

Implications Within the Organisation

The connections inside Al-Qaeda's vast network may incite internal strife. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula may see Al-Shabaab's alliance with the Houthis as an ideological betrayal. Simultaneously, Al-Qaeda's central leadership may face increasing difficulties in harmonising divergent interests and loyalties among its factions. If these arguments escalate, they may result in a schism within the organisation or the emergence of new splinter groups with differing objectives.

⁶⁵ AS official closely associated with Al-Qaeda, November 2025.



The partnership between Iran and the Houthis clearly involves risks. From Tehran's perspective, strengthened ties between the Houthis and Al-Shabaab may attract more international scrutiny, prompting Iranian leaders, already under significant international pressure, to reassess the strategic benefits of these networks in light of the diplomatic and military consequences. The Houthis may engage in internal discussions, since some Zaydi clerics and followers would staunchly oppose cooperating with a Sunni terrorist group on theological grounds.

Geostrategic Consequences

The collaboration might also transform power dynamics in the Red Sea. The Houthis may have access to routes leading to the Indian Ocean, while Al-Shabaab might benefit from improved maritime security and reach. Western countries, particularly the United States and its allies, may see increased security challenges, necessitating an augmentation of their military presence in Djibouti and Somalia. Concurrently, other extremist groups in the region, such as ISIS-Somalia and the Allied Democratic Forces in Congo, may scrutinise and replicate elements of the Al-Shabaab–Houthi model⁶⁶, therefore exacerbating the pervasive threat of extremism across Africa.

The relationship between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis extends beyond Somali issues and carries substantial global strategic implications. It immediately impacts maritime security, regional politics and global trade.

The consequences can be understood on four interconnected levels: within Somalia, where it strengthens Al-Shabaab; across the Horn of Africa, where it undermines security and commerce; globally, where it threatens energy corridors and trade dynamics; and within the organisations themselves, where it intensifies ideological and strategic discord. The Al-Shabaab–Houthi coalition presents a considerable political, security, and economic threat necessitating a synchronised and collective international response.

⁶⁶ ISIS Somalia Official, Qandala, December 2025.

Recommendations

The Al-Shabaab–Houthi nexus is not the root problem, but rather a symptom of a wider structural condition in the Red Sea basin. That condition is ostensibly the convergence of three forces: fragmented sovereignty along coastlines, intensifying regional and extra-regional competition, and the strategic adaptability of non-state actors operating below the threshold of open conflict. Where these three converge, illicit maritime networks thrive; therefore, any effective policy response must avoid treating the nexus as an isolated counterterrorism issue. It must be addressed as a problem in maritime governance and regional order. The objective is not simply to disrupt one alliance, but rather to alter the strategic environment that makes such alliances rational and profitable.

Somalia's primary strategic interest is not defeating Al-Shabaab alone but reasserting effective authority over its maritime and economic space. The nexus with the Houthis becomes dangerous precisely because Somalia's coastline remains weakly governed and politically contested. At the strategic level, Somalia should frame maritime insecurity as a matter of national sovereignty rather than merely a security threat. This approach involves communicating that Somali waters are not a neutral space or a buffer for regional rivalries. The Somali Government should further anchor all international engagement on security, commercial, and diplomatic fronts around Somalia's ownership of its coast and ports. This re-framing is critical, as without it, Somalia risks being perceived as a permissive environment rather than a strategic actor.

A central strategic risk is over-militarising the coastline without building legitimacy or economic alternatives. Heavy external security footprints that are unmoored from governance will likely increase the value of smuggling routes, push illicit actors deeper underground and politically alienate coastal communities. Somalia's long-term interest lies in gradual state presence, not episodic shows of force. Stability will not come from dominating the sea militarily but from making illicit maritime activity politically and economically untenable.

A strategic re-posture is therefore required that treats maritime security as institutional infrastructure rather than episodic naval presence. In addition, significant investment is needed to build governance capacity that endures beyond deployments. But more importantly, there needs to be an acceptance that stability cannot be imported or imposed; rather, it must be locally anchored and regionally reinforced. Whilst military deterrence remains necessary, it is strategically incomplete without political and economic stabilisation.

However, establishing governance ought to be implemented with care. One of the most corrosive patterns in fragile regions is the creation of parallel systems, including



security and financial arrangements that bypass state institutions to expedite or facilitate transactions. While such approaches may appear efficient in the short term, in the long term they will undermine state legitimacy, normalise informality and expand the operating space for extremist and criminal networks. International actors should prioritise alignment with state frameworks even when those frameworks are imperfect.

The Red Sea is no longer a peripheral corridor but a systemic artery of global trade and regional power projection. Fragmented approaches, as experienced, where each state pursues narrow bilateral arrangements, create exploitable situations. Regional actors should converge on a single strategic principle: that the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb must not become zones in which non-state actors substitute for state authority. This does not require ideological alignment or formal alliances but simply requires a minimum consensus on what is unacceptable.

The most destabilising dynamic is when regional competition is externalised into fragile environments. When influence struggles are played out indirectly, such as through ports, informal networks, or proxies, non-state actors become logistical intermediaries. Strategically, regional powers should decouple their broader rivalries from Somali territory and waters, and avoid using coastal access, recognition politics, or commercial concessions as instruments of strategic signalling.

It should recognise that short-term advantage gained through fragmentation produces long-term insecurity for all Red Sea users. In this sense, restraint is not altruism but rather should be seen as risk management.

At a strategic level, the Al-Shabaab–Houthi nexus survives because it solves three problems for both sides. First, facilitates access to routes, markets and intelligence. Second, it strengthens their resilience against sanctions and increased isolation. Third, it allows them to invoke plausible deniability while operating below open confrontation. The strategic response must therefore remove these incentives, rather than merely targeting their manifestations. This means efforts should focus on raising the political and economic costs of maritime facilitation, reducing the opacity that enables deniable cooperation, and doubling down on efforts to shrink the ungoverned spaces (legal, financial, and physical) in which such relationships incubate. When facilitation becomes risky, unreliable, and visible, then pragmatic alliances lose their value.

The Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb must be re-conceptualised from a contested chokepoint into a shared interest zone. History shows that when maritime corridors are treated as zero-sum assets, they attract militarisation, proxy competition, which creates a conducive environment for illicit entrepreneurship. Long-term stability depends on predictable governance rather than dominance, on rules rather than exceptions, and on cooperation that endures political shifts.



The Strategic End State

The desired end state is not the elimination of every threat as that is an unrealistic goal. A Red Sea environment where non-state armed groups cannot leverage maritime space for strategic gain should be the objective. In addition, an environment in which coastal communities derive greater benefit from legal commerce than from illicit facilitation should be created, and in which regional powers perceive stability, not fragmentation, as the safest path to influence.

In such an environment, alliances such as the Al-Shabaab–Houthi nexus become strategically redundant, not merely tactically vulnerable.



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