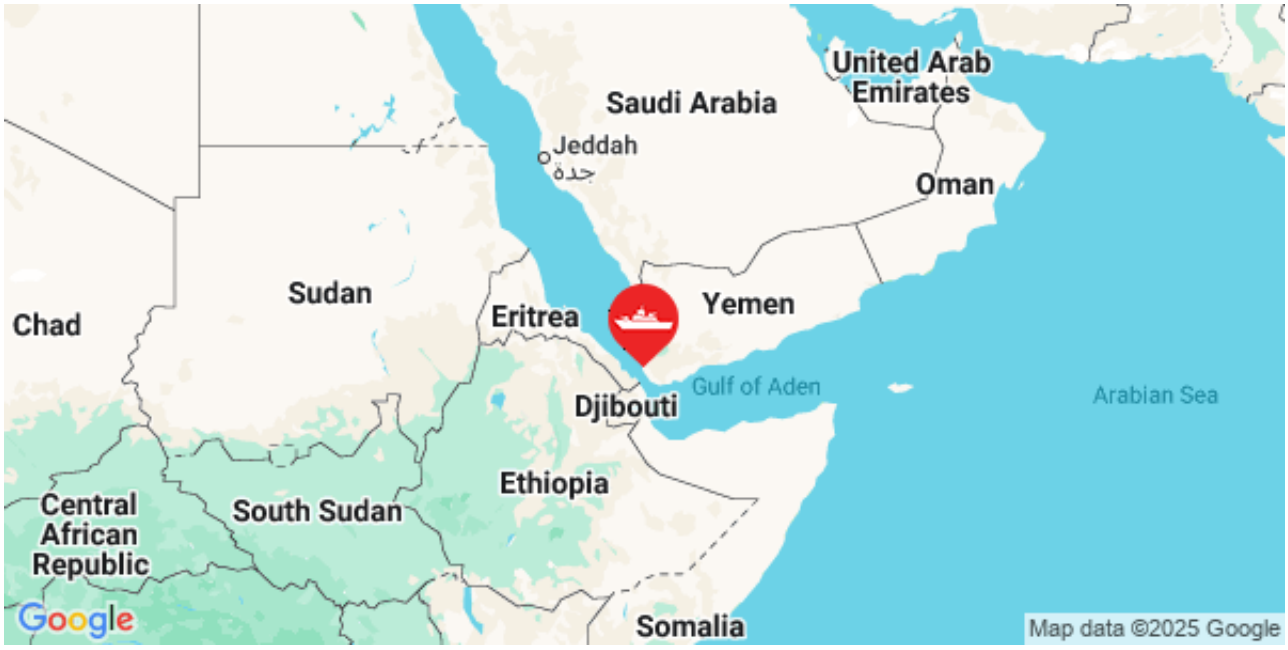
Maritime



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MENA Analysis: NRF seizes extensive Iranian arms shipment to Houthis in Red Sea in July; shows Tehran's continued efforts to enhance allies' capabilities

Executive Summary:

- On July 16, Yemen's National Resistance Forces (NRF) intercepted a Dhow carrying an extensive supply of Iranian arms to the Houthis.
- This underscores Iran's commitment to materially support its regional allies, despite the losses it incurred during the 12-day war with Israel. In this context, the Houthis are emerging as Tehran's most active and valued ally.
- The shipment contained surface-to-sea and surface-to-air missile systems, UAV parts, as well as radars and sensors, underscoring Iran's proclivity to proliferate advanced systems to the Houthis, and the latter's dependence on Iran for technology-heavy components.
- Documentation reportedly seized on the dhow suggested it received clearance from Djiboutian port authorities before departure. This points to the persistent gaps in regional mechanisms intended to enforce the arms embargo on Yemen.

Current Situation

- On July 16, the Presidential Command Council (PCC)-affiliated National Resistance Forces (NRF) leader Tarik Saleh announced that the NRF Navy seized a dhow with an Iranian shipment of arms

at sea. It entailed approximately 750 tons of weapons, notably including surface-to-sea and surface-to-air missile systems, radars and sensors, and other military equipment.

- According to the NRF, the weapons were camouflaged inside electric generators, industrial machines, air pumps, and battery casings to avoid detection on board the vessel, named “al-Sherwa.” The dhow was tracked from the Horn of Africa and was sailing west of the Red Sea shipping lane in an attempt to evade NRF naval patrols.
- The US Central Command (CENTCOM) shared documents indicating that the vessel was cleared for export by the Speed Dhow Management of the Port of Djibouti for the port of Salif in Yemen.
- NRF officials stated that many of the components originated from a manufacturer linked to Iran’s Ministry of Defense. Some of the equipment had instruction manuals written in Persian.
- US CENTCOM commander, General Michael Erik Kurilla, stated that this was the NRF’s largest seizure of Iranian advanced conventional weapons in its history. He praised the NRF for intercepting the Iranian weapons shipment. He stated that Iran remains a key destabilizing force in the region and that blocking its support to the Houthis is vital for regional security and maritime stability.

Assessments & Forecast:

Geopolitical implications of Iran's proliferation effort

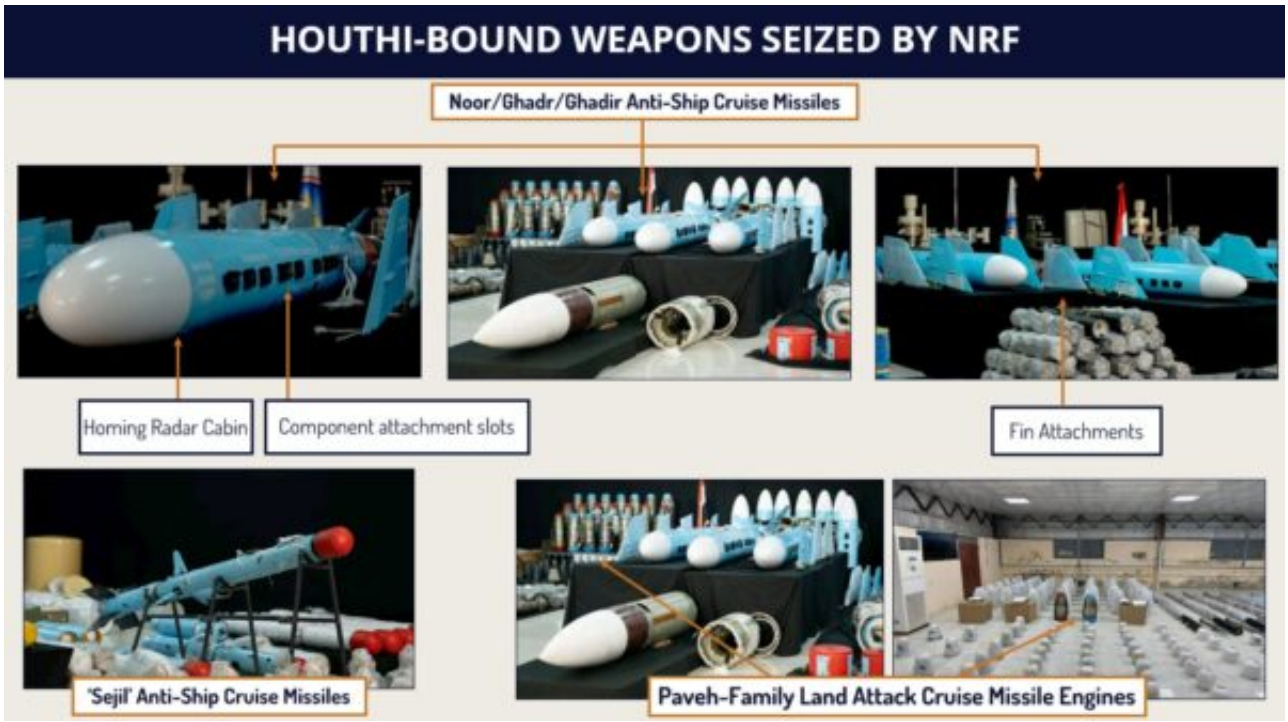
1. Tehran has long relied on maritime routes to covertly transfer military equipment to its regional allies, including the Houthis. Between 2015 and 2024, naval forces from the US, UK, France, and Saudi Arabia intercepted at least 20 shipments of Iranian weaponry en route to Yemen. Transfers that were not thwarted have directly enabled the Houthis to expand and refine their missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) capabilities, which have been employed in cross-border attacks in recent years. More recently, they manifested in repeated maritime attacks at sea and missile attacks on Israeli territory since the onset of the Israel-Hamas war. The latest seizure is significant given its scale, with the number and variety of materials intercepted underscoring the depth of Iran’s support to the Houthis in Yemen.
2. The latest seizure is particularly significant as it marks the first time such a large and diverse cache of weaponry has been interdicted in several years, and the first since the 12-day war between Iran and Israel ended. It is significant given that Iran’s doctrine of bolstering regional allies so that they function as a “ring of fire” deterring Israeli/US attacks on Iran has essentially collapsed during the 12-day war. The pro-Iran camp parties did not deter Israel from attacking, and they also refrained from joining the fray after the conflict started. This was partly because of these factions’ degradation during the Israel-Hamas conflict and other factors constraining them.
3. This derailment of Iran’s doctrine has likely triggered some debate within Tehran on whether to continue its years-long support of regional proxies/allies or re-allocate resources and focus on bolstering Iran’s own military capabilities instead. The latest seizure underscores that Iran is still actively seeking to materially reinforce its regional allies in the aftermath of Israeli and American strikes on its territory. It underlines Iran’s perception that its regional “Axis of Resistance” network is still a reliable source of geopolitical standing and influence, one that needs to be nurtured, despite the erosion in its capabilities as a result of the Israel-Hamas conflict.
4. Tehran likely remains committed to empowering its Axis of Resistance because its affiliates continue to align ideologically and strategically with Iran and retain some capabilities necessary to undermine the regional interests of Iran’s adversaries. A recent example includes a brief uptick in UAV attacks targeting oil facilities in Iraqi Kurdistan, likely carried out by Iran-backed militias. Such attacks demonstrate that while these groups may have suffered losses, they remain effective and can generate economic and political pressure on adversaries via kinetic means. Iran likely views continued support for these groups as essential to asserting its influence in what it perceives as a hostile, US-aligned regional order. By empowering its proxies and allies, Tehran seeks to project strength and instill a sense of vulnerability among its regional foes, signaling that undermining

Iranian interests can still invite destabilizing consequences.

5. Furthermore, the latest weapons shipment likely highlights Tehran's particular trust and alliance with the Houthi movement, which has grown to become the most significant Axis of Resistance actor that still returns dividends to Tehran. This was highlighted in the Houthis' consistency and resilience during the Israel-Hamas war. It manifested in their desire and ability to continue engaging in cross-border attacks throughout the war, despite repeated Israeli strikes and extensive US aerial campaigns against them. This was in contrast to other Iranian regional allies, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran-backed Shiite militias in Iraq, both of which suspended their attacks at a certain stage.
6. The Houthis' continued missile attacks against Israel and commercial vessels reinforced their role as a regional force that provides Tehran with a powerful lever against US and Israeli interests. This has likely upgraded the Houthis' standing to become Iran's most worthy ally to receive support.
7. In addition to that, the Houthis remain a special asset to Tehran, considering the unstable nature of the Yemen civil war (despite the current truce). In this context, Iran likely prioritizes support for the Houthis to bolster their resilience and ability to hold their ground and eventually defeat the internationally recognized PCC.
8. The size of the shipment, being the largest to have ever been intercepted by the NRF, is also remarkable and could signal a current Iranian sense of urgency to supply the Houthis. This may emanate from a Houthi necessity to replenish their arsenal so that they can sustain their force projection campaigns at a critical period when Israel is gearing up to intensify its military operation in Gaza and Western powers are pressurizing Iran to swiftly negotiate and commit to a new nuclear agreement before the snapback mechanism is invoked to reintroduce crippling international sanctions against it.

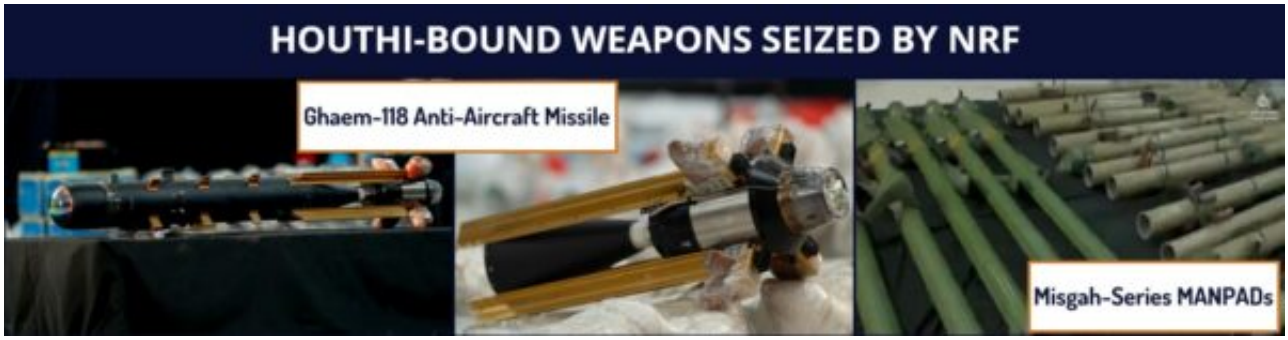
Weapons cache underscores persistent efforts to bolster Houthis' multi-domain military capabilities

Anti-ship munitions



1. The footage released by the NRF shows dismantled kits of Iranian anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM) systems from the **Noor/Qader/Ghadir** family that are primarily derived from the Chinese C-802 platform. The components most visible in the footage are the white dome-shaped noses, which are the radar homing cabins that are critical for guidance and precision. While it is difficult to differentiate between the different variants within this family, the proliferation of Ghadir would be consistent with Iran's proclivity to provide the Houthis with relatively advanced systems. The Ghadir's provision would indicate that Iran is supplying its most advanced system within this missile family, featuring an extended range of 300 kilometers. This is also consistent with Houthi claims regarding operational ranges of some of their missiles.
2. Furthermore, the cache contained what appears to be an Iranian-origin cruise missile designated by the Houthis as **Sejil (sometimes** referred to as Sahil). The Houthis first unveiled this missile during a military parade in 2023 but kept it relatively obscured. While publicly available information on the system remains limited, the Houthis claimed it has a range of 180 kilometers and carries a 100-kilogram warhead. Its guidance mechanism remains unknown. The latest NRF seizure appears to be the first reported instance of this specific missile being seized as part of a weapons shipment from Iran, further underscoring Tehran's proliferation efforts.
3. The shipment also included **turbojet engines** used in land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), specifically those integrated into Iran's **Paveh-family** missile system, which the Houthis refer to as the Quds LACM and the US designates as 351 missiles. These engines are critical for providing sustained propulsion over long distances, enabling the missile to maintain low-altitude, terrain-following flight paths that reduce its detectability. The inclusion of such advanced propulsion systems further signals Iran's direct role in enhancing the Houthis' strike capabilities beyond anti-ship operations, by enabling long-range precision attacks against land-based targets. In addition, at least two missile systems designated by the Houthis as "**Quds Z-0**" and "**Sayyad**" constitute an indication that some Iranian signature LACMs have been converted to surface-to-sea systems, with ranges of 800km according to the group. Therefore, the shipment of the turbojets could also potentially serve the Houthi stockpiles of surface-to-sea missiles.
4. Overall, the development reiterates Iran's continued material support to bolster the Houthis' long-range maritime strike capabilities beyond the legacy anti-ship missile systems the Houthis inherited from the collapsed Yemeni army and government as a result of the civil war. It also highlights that critical core components of the Houthis' missile systems continue to be sourced by Iran. This further reaffirms that these elements are highly technical and require industrial capabilities and specialized materials that mostly remain beyond the Houthis' domestic production capacity.

Anti-Aircraft munitions

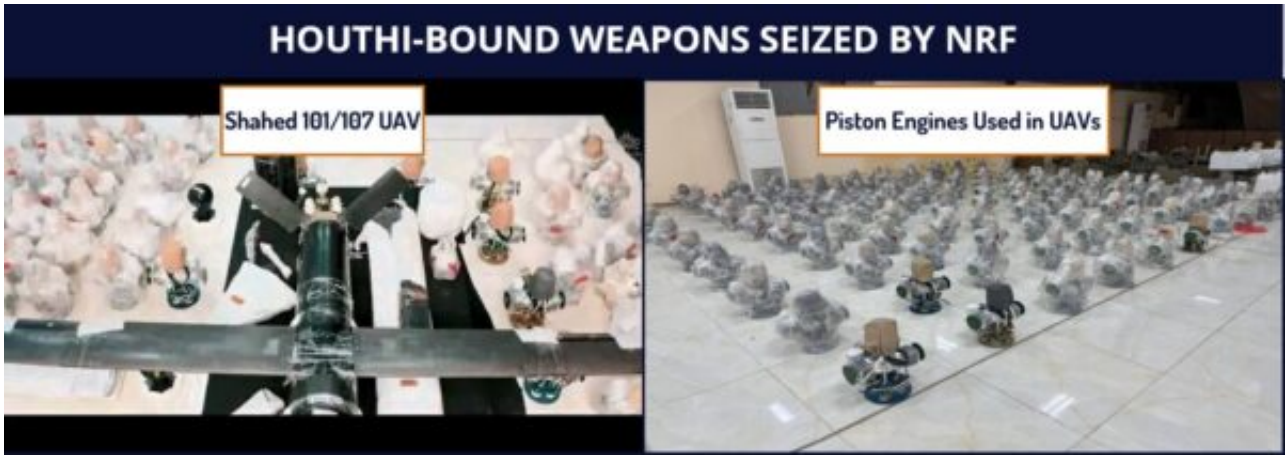


1. The **Ghaem-118 missile**, which appears to be based on the American Coyote Block 2/3 system, was also among the intercepted weapons on "al-Sherwa." Unveiled in February 2025 during the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Great Prophet 19 military drill, the Ghaem-118 is equipped with an electro-optical/infrared (EO/IR) seeker enabling it to lock onto targets using heat

signatures or visual contrast. While its specifications remain unconfirmed, the missile is reported to have a range of up to 25 kilometers, making it one of the possible surface-to-air systems with which the Houthis have successfully downed American MQ-9 Reapers and other UAVs several times in the past. The absence of any launch system among the seized components suggests that the Houthis already possess the required launch infrastructure within Yemen. The inclusion of the Ghaem-118 in this cache further indicates that Iran views the Houthis as a frontline ally, supplying them with their advanced and most recently unveiled weapon systems rather than only legacy or first-generation technologies. It also shows that Iran is actively proliferating surface-to-air missile systems, at least the more tactical ones, despite the damage it incurred and the gaps in its own domestic aerial defense umbrella, which surfaced during the Iran-Israel war.

2. Also included were **Misagh-series man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADs)**, Iran's versions of the Chinese QW-1, designed to target low-flying aircraft, helicopters, and drones. Their inclusion underscores Iran's longstanding support for the Houthis' short-range air defense capabilities, which is relevant to the more tactical aspects of aircraft flying at very low altitudes of several km in Yemen.

Explosive-laden UAVs

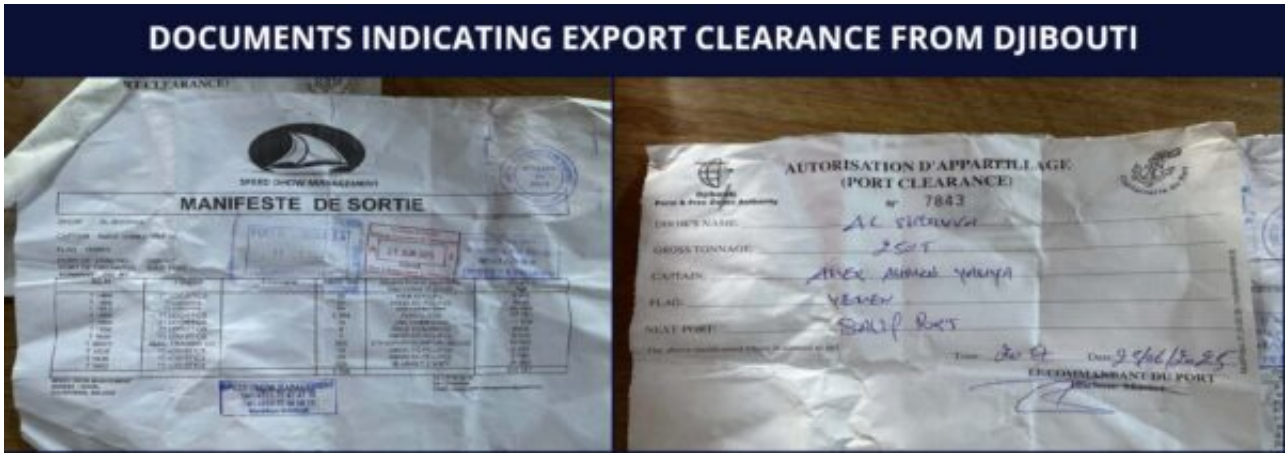


1. A full **Shahed-101/107 UAV** was seized, along with essential components required for the assembly process of explosive-laden UAVs. The UAV, a compact loitering munition, is part of Iran's expanding family of proliferated one-way attack UAVs that are designed for precision strikes. Approximately 96 **piston engines**, typically used to power one-way attack drones, were shown as part of the latest seizure. Iran traditionally acquired these engines from external sources, including by obtaining German/Western-made engines and procuring from Chinese producers, but has also moved on to reverse-engineer and develop such components on its own, particularly through the internationally sanctioned Oje Parvaz Mado Nafar firm (also known as Mado), whose engines were also found in Shahed-136 UAVs exported by Iran to Russia. The seizure also included various guidance systems, stabilizers, and airframes, indicating that the shipment was intended to support a broader drone assembly and sustainment pipeline.
2. As with the cruise missile parts seized, the UAV-related equipment underscores the Houthis' dependence on Iranian supplies of critical components for their drone arsenal. Nevertheless, this is likely a more easily maintained supply chain, given the relatively small sizes of these components and the fact that with drones, the Houthis are likely producing some of the basic elements on their own, such as their bodies.

Radars & Sensors

The images show ruggedized command-and-control (C2) terminals. These laptops are industrial-grade, shock-resistant systems widely used for field deployment. They could serve multiple roles, such as mission planning for UAVs, real-time strike coordination, telemetry processing for missile launches, or mobile radar/fire-control interfaces. The prominent twin-lens unit is likely a dual electro-optical/infrared (EO/IR) surveillance system, distinguishable by its twin-lens configuration and compact turret design. The platform essentially gives a high-resolution daylight camera alongside an infrared sensor, indicating the system's capability to operate effectively in both daytime and low-light or obscured environments. Parallel to bolstering aerial defense to some extent, such systems could potentially also be used to hunt targets, especially if Houthi forces could mount them on vessels to support intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and target acquisition efforts. As a whole, the provision of radars and sensors further highlights how Iran's direct material support bolsters the Houthis' ability to monitor their backyard and project force successfully.

Challenges to intercepting dhows supplying weapons to Houthis to persist



1. Collected documentation suggested the weapons were smuggled aboard a dhow that had received official clearance from the Djiboutian authorities, including approval for a declared export cargo of car batteries and fertilizer. A report citing maritime tracking data indicates the vessel had been registered as a fishing vessel in Oman in 2024. The vessel went dark near Omani waters on April

23-24 after departing Iran's Bandar Abbas. It later reappeared in Djibouti on May 19-20, where it was likely issued forged documents and loaded with camouflage materials to conceal its actual cargo. By the time of the port inspection in Djibouti, it was reportedly flying a Yemeni flag. This suggests an attempt to disguise the vessel's identity and route. The vessel's classification as a fishing boat, along with the innocuous nature of the listed items, likely resulted in reduced scrutiny during inspection.

2. This also underscores the inherent limitations and vulnerabilities of the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM). Established in 2016, UNVIM was primarily designed to facilitate the flow of commercial and humanitarian goods into Yemen. Its role is administrative and focused on reviewing shipping documents and ensuring compliance with UN sanctions targeting the Houthis. Vessels bound for Houthi-controlled ports of Hodeidah and Salif typically stop in Djibouti for UNVIM inspection. However, credible evidence suggests that some ships, after clearance, meet at sea with smaller vessels, such as dhows, likely to transfer weapons or other illicit cargo before proceeding to their final destination.
3. Additionally, even if the vessels are inspected in Djibouti, the mechanism's mandate applies only to ships above a certain tonnage and does not extend to smaller boats, dhows, or ships using alternate landing points under Houthi control. Although UNVIM has improved its procedures by physically inspecting all containerized cargo, defined as goods transported in standardized 20- or 40-foot containers, this focus excludes non-containerized and traditional vessels, which often carry bulk or unpackaged goods and fall outside the inspection regime. This gap is evidenced in data suggesting that, since October 2023, some ships have docked at Houthi-held ports without undergoing any UNVIM inspection.
4. Furthermore, the mechanism is neither equipped nor authorized to conduct interdictions at sea. Although the US has indicated interest in expanding the UNVIM's mandate, such an attempt may be countered within the UN Security Council (UNSC) by Russia, which has resisted the imposition of stronger measures against the Houthis or Iran. As a result, UNVIM remains a limited and under-resourced operation when compared to the scale, complexity, and evolving tactics of Houthi smuggling networks.
5. Reports indicate that the Houthis are also increasingly updating their maritime deception tactics. These include the manipulation of Automatic Identification System (AIS) data, such as downgrading from Class A to Class B transponders to obscure IMO numbers, and the use of falsified Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) codes linked to third-party or loosely regulated flag registries. Vessels frequently switch AIS systems mid-voyage to evade tracking and conceal their true origin or destination. The effectiveness of this smuggling network, despite international interdiction efforts, indicates that the illicit flow of arms into Yemen is likely to continue, reinforcing the Houthis' long-term military capabilities.
6. **FORECAST:** While efforts to curb Iran's smuggling of weapons to the Houthis have been ongoing for several years, as also seen by reports of the NRF intercepting five such shipments in 2025, the overall success rate remains low. An unconfirmed report estimates that just five to ten percent of weapons shipments intended for the Houthis are intercepted. This indicates that the vast majority of illicit transfers likely reach their destination, continuing to strengthen the Houthi arsenal.
7. **FORECAST:** Given the absence of a coordinated international operation in the Red Sea to intercept illicit arms shipments, Iran is likely to continue smuggling advanced weapons to the Houthis with relative ease. However, the latest seizures may prompt the US and its partners to intensify maritime surveillance around Yemen, particularly in the Gulf of Oman and the Red Sea. Further interceptions are likely to be announced in the coming months.