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Lessons from an Unlikely Enemy

What the Marine Corps can learn from the Houthis

by Capt Tyler C. Gunn

The Uncomfortable Teacher

The Houthis are not the type of adversary the Marine Corps typically studies for operational inspiration. As a non-peer, non-state actor labeled a terrorist group, they lack the prestige, professionalism, or legitimacy usually associated with doctrinal case studies. Yet, over the past year, Houthi forces operating out of Yemen have managed to challenge the security of global shipping lanes, draw sustained U.S. naval and air power into a secondary theater, and impose billions of dollars in operational and economic costs, all without fielding a navy or an air force.¹

This comes at a time when the Marine Corps is transforming through concepts like Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations and Stand-In Forces, emphasizing distributed, resilient operations in contested maritime environments. While their methods are often illegal and morally indefensible, the Houthis' impact offers a unique opportunity for doctrinal reflection.

The Marine Corps should, by no means, admire the Houthis' ideology. Rather, the Marine Corps must extract operational lessons from unlikely sources to adapt to future fights. The following sections will explore how the Houthis, through asymmetry, survivability, and adaptation, achieve outsized effects, and how those principles can inform the Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) and broader force design for the modern era.²

>Capt Gunn is the Camp Operations Officer for Camp Schwab, Okinawa. He is an Infantry Officer and will be attending Maneuver Captain's Career Course in January 2026.

While their methods are often illegal and morally indefensible, their effects are undeniable. If the Marine Corps is serious about fighting and winning in austere, distributed environments, it must be willing to study even the most unlikely sources. The Houthi case offers hard-earned lessons in survivability, asymmetry, and operational economy that should inform how the MLR and broader force structure evolves for the future fight.³

Strategic Asymmetry: Cost vs Consequence

Houthi forces have demonstrated a mature understanding of asymmetry. Rather than destroy U.S. naval assets outright, they use cheap munitions such as commercial drones, modified cruise missiles, and explosive-laden boats to impose strategic costs. Each intercepted missile or drone requires an expensive response, often in the form of a \$1–4 million missile from a U.S. destroyer. In total, U.S. defensive operations in the Red Sea and surrounding areas have cost upward of \$1 billion in munitions and operational expenses alone, with additional billions in indirect costs such as rerouted shipping

and higher insurance premiums.⁴ By comparison, the cost of the Houthi weapons themselves, such as \$10,000 drones or \$100,000 cruise missiles, is negligible in scale.

Beyond economics, the Houthis use drone swarms and loitering munitions to saturate and deplete air defense systems before launching a follow-on strike. In January 2024, the Houthis struck the *Marlin Luanda* tanker in the Gulf of Aden, causing a significant fire and proving that these lower-end systems can achieve kinetic results.⁵ Their most notable success came in June 2024 when a Houthi explosive-laden unmanned surface vessel (USV) struck the MV *Tutor*, sinking the ship and killing one crew member.⁶ This layered threat model is tactically simple but strategically shrewd. The goal is not necessarily to achieve a kill; rather, it is to force the United States and its allies into a continuous, expensive, and unsustainable defensive posture.

The Marine Corps should take note. As future stand-in forces operate inside contested maritime zones, they will need ways to impose cost and uncertainty without relying solely on exquisite, high-end platforms. A modern application of asymmetry could involve pairing low-cost decoys, unmanned systems, and loitering munitions with more capable fires to overwhelm adversary defenses. In this way, even systems that fail to achieve kinetic effects can still achieve operational leverage by shaping enemy behavior.

Survivability by Simplicity

One of the most effective aspects of the Houthi model is its survivability. They maintain a distributed and mobile network of launch platforms that are often abandoned or hidden immediately after firing. Trucks are used as mobile launchers for cruise missiles and ballistic systems, often concealed in civilian areas, caves, or terrain features until moments before launch.⁷ Their use of emission control prevents early detection, and their units disaggregate immediately after firing. In February 2025, a Houthi launcher was observed firing a Quds-4 cruise missile and then being driven into a civilian market to avoid retribution.⁸

Communications are kept minimal or emission-controlled, and once an attack is executed, personnel disperse into civilian terrain or simply leave the launcher behind. This not only frustrates intelligence and targeting but also preserves the force for continued operations. The United States has not been able to consistently eliminate these systems pre-launch, despite a robust intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) presence.⁹

The Marine Corps, particularly MLR units, should learn from this. Survivability in the modern fight is not just about armor or stealth. Survivability also consists of being hard to find, fast to fire, and quick to disappear. Doctrinal emphasis on mobility, concealment, and operational discipline can make U.S. forces just as elusive, without sacrificing accountability or legitimacy. The Houthis have proven that a force does not need to win the ISR battle to survive it.

Diverse, Attritable Toolkits: A Naval Combined-Arms Dilemma

The Houthis field a layered suite of weapons that presents a genuine combined-arms dilemma for naval forces. Their toolkits include anti-ship cruise missiles, land-attack cruise missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles, USVs, and loitering drones. Quds-series missiles are estimated to have ranges exceeding 800 km, while their anti-ship ballistic missiles have struck ships as far as 450 km from shore.¹⁰

None of these systems individually outmatches U.S. capabilities, but together they generate a threat environment that is difficult to counter. Ships defending against USVs must stay close to the waterline, leaving themselves vulnerable to ballistic attack. Those focused on air threats may miss surface drones closing in below radar coverage. In one attack sequence, U.S. destroyers were forced to intercept multiple drones and missiles simultaneously, each requiring precision munitions worth millions of dollars.¹¹

For the Marine Corps, this underscores the importance of fielding multi-domain fires within each littoral unit. A mix of kinetic systems from low-cost drones to mobile anti-ship missiles, combined with

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electronic warfare and ISR platforms, can multiply effects. The Houthis have shown that quantity and diversity, even at low quality, can complicate enemy decision making and slow their tempo. The MLR must adopt a similar mindset: present layered, redundant, and hard-to-counter threats that punch above their cost.

Civilian Integration and Spotting Networks

Another hallmark of Houthi operations is their use of civilian infrastructure and population networks for ISR. Fishing vessels double as spotters, visually identifying ships and relaying coordinates via handheld radios or encrypted apps. In multiple instances, commercial ships were identified in port or in transit by civilian spotters before being targeted by drones or cruise missiles.¹² Civilian buildings conceal launchers and drone facilities. While this violates the Law of Armed Conflict, the tactical value is undeniable: their sensors are cheap, persistent, and embedded in the battlespace.

Without violating ethical norms, the Marine Corps could adopt a version of

this approach. In the Pacific, partnerships with allied fishing cooperatives, coastal villages, or maritime agencies could form a “civilian sensor net” that extends ISR reach well beyond the line of contact. Training and equipping local partners with basic observation tools would enable persistent awareness without overcommitting precious ISR platforms.

Imposing Strategic Effects Without Strategic Assets

Perhaps the most sobering aspect of the Houthi model is its ability to impose global consequences without possessing any strategic assets. The Houthis have no navy, no air force, and no space capabilities. Yet, through irregular adaptation and operational imagination, they have shaped international shipping patterns, tied down two U.S. carrier strike groups, and forced NATO allies to reposition naval assets to the Red Sea.¹³ The sinking of the *MV Tutor*, the disruption of oil exports, and the rerouting of commercial traffic around the Cape of Good Hope all serve as examples of strategic effects generated by non-strategic means.

This should provoke introspection in the Marine Corps. Are we over-relying on exquisite platforms and strategic infrastructure to produce effects that could be achieved more flexibly? In an era of stand-in forces, cost-imposing tactics, and contested logistics, the ability to act imaginatively with limited means will define effectiveness. The Houthis’ methods show that operational leverage comes not just from capability but also from mindset. For the MLR, this means thinking more like an insurgent force embedded in a peer conflict: lethal, elusive, and unburdened by legacy systems.

Vignette: Luzon, 2028

Dawn broke over the western coast of Luzon as an MLR operated in near silence from a concealed position twelve kilometers inland. A Chinese Type 055 destroyer had been operating aggressively in the Bashi Channel, supported by drone swarms and long-range ISR aircraft. The MLR’s command node, decentralized and mobile, received a coded message from a local fishing

cooperative. The vessel had tracked the destroyer visually for the past six hours and confirmed its current position within strike range.

A low-cost drone swarm was launched first with dozens of quadcopters flying erratically toward the Chinese ship, each carrying decoy electronics. As the destroyer activated its radar and fired interceptors to neutralize the swarm, the Marines triggered a coordinated release of loitering munitions from concealed positions along the coast. Simultaneously, a pair of unmanned surface vessels launched from a hidden estuary began their approach.

With enemy defenses saturated and distracted, two modified Naval Strike Missile platforms emerged from hardened terrain shelters, fired their payloads, and immediately shut down. Marines relocated the launch vehicles within minutes. By the time the Type 055 realized it was under real attack, it had less than 20 seconds to react. One missile struck amidships. The damage forced the People's Liberation Army Navy to withdraw all major surface combatants from the Luzon Strait for the next 72 hours, effectively shutting down the corridor to Chinese naval operations and buying critical maneuver space for joint forces operating in the Philippine archipelago. The vessel lost propulsion and was forced to withdraw under tow.

The Marines never held terrain. They never used a tank. And they never engaged in a direct firefight. But by combining deception, distributed fires, local ISR, and low-cost saturation tactics, they accomplished what a billion-dollar ship could not: denying the sea to the enemy.

As the unit exfiltrated and reestablished a fallback position further south, a company gunnery sergeant remarked, "We never thought we'd borrow tactics from a Yemeni militia. But today? It worked."

From Imitation to Innovation

While the Houthis present a unique and unlikely source of tactical insight, the goal is not imitation—it is transformation. The Marine Corps must examine what makes Houthi tactics ef-

fective, discard the illegal and unethical, and adapt the rest into a professional, scalable doctrine suited for great power competition. That means embracing low-cost, modular capabilities that degrade enemy systems. It means devolving initiative to the lowest levels so Marines can act fast and independently. It means integrating local partnerships to expand awareness in ways that satellites and drones cannot.

In short, it means embracing a mindset that values effectiveness over tradition. We cannot afford to wait for peer adversaries to teach us what the Houthis already have. The lessons are available now, but only if we have the humility to learn.

We Say, "More With Less"—They Live It

The Marine Corps often touts its ability to do more with less. But in the Houthis, we see a group doing exactly that and achieving strategic effects. They do not just stretch limited resources; they maximize them in ways that challenge even the most advanced militaries. We succeed against them today because of our economic and technological advantages, not because we out-innovate them. That luxury will not exist against a peer adversary.

Studying the Houthis does not require endorsing their ideology or unlawful tactics. It requires the humility to recognize that innovation often comes from the edges of the battlefield, not the center. If the Marine Corps is to remain a stand-in force capable of imposing cost, denying terrain, and surviving in a contested environment, it must look beyond tradition, even if that means learning from our enemies.

Notes

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11. Jonathan Lehrfeld, "April Red Sea Recap: Fight Against Houthis Continues After Lull" *Navy Times*, May 1, 2024, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2024/04/30/april-red-sea-recap-fight-against-houthis-continues-after-lull/#:~:text=By%20Jonathan%20Lehrfeld,no%20injuries%20or%20damages%20reported>.

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