

Maritime Maneuvers: Navigating Irregular Warfare in Yemen's Civil War

Description

Before the [2018 National Defense Strategy](#) recognized Irregular Warfare (IW) as a key competency for the Joint Force, a unique cell of Navy Surface Warfare and intelligence officers, an Army Civil Affairs Team (CAT), and Royal Navy (UK) personnel initiated a maritime irregular warfare campaign in the early stages of Yemen's civil war. Led by the Maritime Coalition Coordination Cell (MCCC), this 18-month campaign successfully restricted adversary access to proxies, bolstered humanitarian efforts, and facilitated a shift in control to an international authority. The MCCC's experience managing effects of this conflict provides lessons for conducting irregular warfare in the maritime domain, particularly in establishing clear objectives, building and maintaining human networks, effective information sharing, and integrating military actions with diplomatic and economic initiatives. The MCCC's lessons apply not only to strategic competition with the PRC but also on the reemerging threat to the Red Sea by Yemen's Houthi rebels.

Responding to the Yemeni Civil War: The MCCC's role in irregular warfare

Long plagued by civil wars, extremism, and poverty, Yemen faced a new crisis in January 2015 when the Houthi-Saleh alliance [overthrew](#) the sitting government. This sparked a civil war, drawing in Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and leading to a [United Nations arms embargo](#). The conflict, characterized by extensive air strikes and missile use, also posed major maritime challenges, including threats to the Bab-el-Mandeb oil transit route, through which an estimated [6.2 million barrels of oil](#), accounting for approximately 9% of the world's seaborne traded petroleum, passed daily. Recognizing that most Yemenis depended on maritime-transported food imports for survival, the US Navy responded by establishing the MCCC.

This multinational organization was tasked not only with securing oil routes and enforcing the arms embargo, but also with protecting essential food shipments into Yemen. Addressing these interconnected challenges involved building a network of diverse partners to lessen the Civil War's impact. Over its 18 months of operational activity, this network was instrumental in understanding the dynamic interests of influential regional and international actors and working towards realigning objectives to support all partners and foster compromise. The network was one of the most important tools in effectively transitioning the MCCC into an internationally recognized mechanism under the UN while concurrently addressing the humanitarian crisis and countering conditions that foster extremism

and terrorism.

MCCC's approach and successes

The MCCC's strategy for Yemen did much to stabilize the region, supporting foreign internal defense and counterterrorism. In particular, four lines of effort were key to the MCCC's success: goal alignment, network building, information sharing, and aligning military actions with diplomatic and economic initiatives. Despite limited resources, the MCCC improved the ability of regional partners to focus limited resources on interdicting small vessels, a greater smuggling threat, and worked with a wide range of unified action partners to help foster a multilateral approach. The MCCC's approach offers a model for future engagements, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and in addressing emerging crises like Gaza where maritime humanitarian delivery and deconfliction are highly likely. Additionally, in late 2023 the Houthis, who still control most of western Yemen, have begun targeting commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea in their efforts to support Hamas in the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. This capability has already begun affecting commercial maritime shipping and calls for a multinational solution in which industry plays a major role.

Setting, changing, and achieving objectives through a network

The US Navy, USAID, and the Department of State always aimed to transition the MCCC's functions to an internationally recognized organization. Although the campaign's end goal consistently focused on transition, the specifics of who would take over the MCCC its functions evolved up until the day the [United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen](#) (UNVIM) began operations. The MCCC developed its initial objective in collaboration with the State Department, USAID, and policymakers in Washington, D.C., a luxury not all organizations engaged in irregular warfare are afforded. Despite this alignment of policy and strategy, the MCCC learned that in any form of warfare, allies and partners often have a significant say, sometimes even more than the adversary.

One major challenge of working with multiple partners was identifying and understanding their interests to find a mutually agreeable end state. This task was more complex than just overlapping two circles in a Venn diagram; the MCCC had to consider half-a-dozen shifting, interrelated circles across each element of national power. Regular and open engagement with partners through liaison officers stationed at their headquarters, operations centers, or embassies was key to managing this intricate problem. This network not only helped establish the initial goals for the MCCC but also quickly identified shifts in partners' interests based on battlefield developments, allowing for the adjustment of goals and objectives within the constraints of the adversary and complex operating environment.

As the coalition's de facto leader, Saudi Arabia's main objective was to stop the influx of illicit cargo into port facilities that could strengthen the Houthi regime and enable attacks on Saudi territory. The Saudis initially blockaded the ports to halt commercial maritime traffic and prevent arms trafficking as outlined by UNSCR 2216. While this blockade achieved the coalition's goal, it exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, as 90% of all goods in Yemen, including food, are imported. This action inadvertently drove neutral parties toward the Houthis and, in some cases, towards groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State Yemen Province (ISIS-Y). To mitigate these secondary effects and counter negative press and Iranian propaganda, the MCCC worked with diplomatic partners to find a solution that supported Saudi security goals while allowing legitimate shipping into the port facilities and deconflicting humanitarian access in a war zone.

The solution that all parties eventually supported was transitioning to an independent mechanism for processing humanitarian access and screening, verifying, and inspecting all incoming commercial cargo vessels. This allowed the Saudi and Emirati navies to focus on intercepting small crafts used for weapons trafficking. This mechanism also served as an interim extension of the Yemeni Ministry of Transportation, with the long-term goal of returning governance to the internationally recognized Republic of Yemeni Government (ROYG). The MCCC quickly realized it needed a network of unified action partners for this interim solution.

Building and fighting through a network

Using [Naval Co-operation and Guidance for Shipping](#) (NCAGS) Reserve officers from the US Navy's 5th Fleet, who were commercial mariners in their civilian lives, the MCCC began collecting data, identifying best practices, and working with agencies to ensure the flow of aid and necessary commercial goods into Yemen.

These efforts led to relationships with various intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which provided goods and services for Yemen and advised Saudi naval leadership on how to best deconflict humanitarian access to an active warzone. After recognizing the diversity and number of involved parties and their diverging interests, the MCCC expanded its network to include organizations like the UN's World Food Program (WFP) and Office of Coordination Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), as well as port operators and commercial shipping lines. These organizations also highlighted a shared need for a rapid process to verify legitimate cargo to ease Saudi concerns while delivering lifesaving aid into Yemen.

The MCCC's first priority was to establish relationships that would support their operations and set the stage for a transition to what would become the UNVIM. Initially, the MCCC built networks based on existing military-to-military relationships developed through security cooperation and exercises in

Saudi Arabia, primarily with the Royal Saudi Naval Forces and 5th Fleet personnel. The MCCC also collaborated with NGOs, IGOs, and diplomatic partners and brought in a US Army CAT from the 83rd Civil Affairs Battalion to focus on this effort. Using a combination of NCAGS and their assigned CAT, the MCCC worked with commercial shipping agencies and private firms in Yemen. A core group of military, commercial, diplomatic, and humanitarian actors soon formed the foundation of the MCCC's center of gravity - its network of unified action partners. The general framework of the MCCC's network is depicted in the figure below.

MCCC Diagram

A Diagram Showing the Four Primary Partner Groups MCCC Built Their Network Around

The MCCC's network expanded rapidly, mainly the principle of open and candid information sharing was its foundation. The MCCC made all its data available to any partner willing to work with them or the coalition. It published weekly reports on the conditions of Yemeni ports, updates on threats and security concerns, expected wait times, and running totals on imported cargo. Examples of these reports are depicted below. The MCCC also informed coalition forces and UN officials of any suspicious vessels applying for entry to Yemeni ports for follow-up search or interdiction. Furthermore, the MCCC maintained a watch, and any partner could reach out and submit questions via phone or email, increasing bidirectional information sharing within the network. Conducting over 90% of its daily activities on unclassified networks was key to the MCCC's success and a vital reason for its seamless transition of databases, processes, and reporting mechanisms to the UN in spring 2016. Any organization taking a similar approach to irregular warfare must also strive to operate unclassified and openly, regardless of institutional and organizational resistance.

Weekly report

Weekly report

Examples of MCCC's weekly reports

Although the 5th Fleet rapidly mobilized military capabilities for initial deconfliction and coordination, growing regional demands led to a consensus that transferring long-term responsibility to groups specializing in humanitarian aid and commercial cargo oversight would be more effective. Also, the more the US military became the visible face of maritime access and deconfliction into Yemen, the more vulnerable the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) and coalition became to malign influence operations, and the greater the loss of legitimacy for ROYG and other regional actors. Additionally, during this period, US Central Command was conducting Operation Inherent Resolve, and any military resources dedicated to Yemen detracted from the United States' primary regional effort of defeating

the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Having senior leaders within 5th Fleet recognize the need for non-military and international solutions to the problem in Yemen and empowering the MCCC to pursue such a course of action was critical to enduring success and a reason UNVIM is still operational today, seven years after taking over from the MCCC. Frequent meetings with the State Department's Yemen Affairs Unit, video calls with USAID in D.C., and regular interactions with UN and NGO officials were key to aligning military efforts with interagency activities. In fact, this approach foreshadowed the [2023 Joint Concept for Campaigning](#), which emphasizes that during strategic competition, "the Joint Force will routinely play a mutually supporting role with other USG departments and agencies, allies and partners, and other interorganizational partners."

While the military aspect of the MCCC was not the primary focus, it was crucial to its success. Before the UNVIM became operational, US naval intelligence frequently identified vessels carrying suspected contraband. This intelligence enabled the Royal Saudi Naval Forces and Emirati vessels to interdict these ships and prevent their entry into Yemeni ports. Furthermore, many essential relationships underpinning the MCCC's network stemmed from longstanding contacts established through regional naval exercises and operations in the region. These relationships leveraged the infrastructure of the Combined Maritime Forces, established in the early 2000s, to work collaboratively with volunteer member nations and enhance maritime security in the region.

In addition, the MCCC's military training and security cooperation activities aimed to bolster partner capabilities at both the tactical and theater strategic levels of war. On the tactical front, the focus was on enhancing partner naval forces' ability to conduct seaborne visit, board, search, and seizure operations, essential for interdicting small vessels used in smuggling. Strategically, the training enabled the Saudi military to develop civil-military coordination and humanitarian deconfliction mechanisms. These were vital for managing access to conflict zones, protecting humanitarian actors, and gaining an advantage in the information and human dimensions of warfare.

The power of common goals

During its tenure, the MCCC enhanced US engagement and influence in the Middle East, improved cooperation with regional partners, and effectively managed large quantities of humanitarian aid. It played a key role in facilitating commercial access to Yemen's western coast ports and supported partners with vital data and information, thereby strengthening maritime security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The success of the MCCC was largely due to its ability to align goals with international partners, share information openly, and coordinate its efforts with other instruments of national power. The MCCC's innovative approach to complex maritime challenges offers valuable lessons for

dealing with similar issues in the Indo-Pacific and potential humanitarian responses to conflicts like the war in Gaza. This model set by the MCCC not only underscores the power of collaborative and adaptive strategies in irregular warfare but also stands as a testament to the potential of innovative solutions in shaping a more stable and secure global maritime landscape. Moreover, at the time of publication Yemen is once again playing a disruptive role in the maritime domain and whatever solution is implemented it will require some form of civil-military coordination between the region's naval forces and commercial shippers as well as enduring presence from regional partners. The MCCC offers a potential framework to begin planning such a solution.

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Main image: Guided-missile destroyer USS The Sullivans (DDG 68) and patrol coastal ship USS Hurricane (PC 3) sail in the background as Sailors inventory a large quantity of urea fertilizer and ammonium perchlorate discovered on board a fishing vessel intercepted by U.S. naval forces while transiting international waters in the Gulf of Oman, Nov. 9. (U.S. Navy photo by Sonar Technician (Surface) 1st Class Kevin Frus)

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