STUDY NOTES · BASIC CONCEPT

Who Are the Houthis? What Is a Strategic Chokepoint? Why Does the Conflict Matter to India?

International Relations

11 Oct 2026

A. Who Are the Houthis?

1. The Houthis, formally known as Ansar Allah, are an armed political and religious movement originating in northern Yemen.
2. They emerged from the Zaydi Shia community of Yemen.
3. They took control of Yemen's capital, Sana'a, in 2014.
4. They have fought Yemen's internationally recognised government and Saudi-led forces.
5. Iran has supported the movement, although its relationship with Tehran should not be understood as eliminating the Houthis' own political interests and decision-making.

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B. Why Are Mecca and Medina Important?

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Mecca is home to the Kaaba and Masjid al-Haram. Muslims face the Kaaba during their daily prayers, and the Hajj pilgrimage takes place here.

File:Gumbat Khizra, Masjid Nabvi, Madina Munawara - panoramio.jpg - Wikimedia Commons

Medina is home to Al-Masjid an-Nabawi, the Prophet's Mosque, and a major centre of Islamic history.

Both cities are in Saudi Arabia and hold exceptional religious significance for Muslims worldwide. Threats involving these cities or their airports can have implications for religious travel, public safety and regional sensitivities.

C. What Is Bab-el-Mandeb?

Reliance on Bab-el-Mandeb Strait may hit eco; India needs alternate sea trade routes: GTRI

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Bab-el-Mandeb is a strategic maritime chokepoint connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean.

Its importance includes:

1. Global trade: A key route for shipping between Europe and Asia through the Suez Canal.
2. Energy security: Relevant to the movement of oil and other energy products.
3. Strategic location: Lies between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa.
4. Military significance: Instability can increase shipping risks, insurance costs and naval-security requirements.
5. Disruptions around Bab-el-Mandeb can force vessels to take longer alternative routes, increasing transit times and freight costs.

D. What Is a Strategic Chokepoint?

A strategic chokepoint is a narrow geographical passage through which a significant volume of trade, energy supplies or military movement passes.

Important examples include:

Chokepoint	Connects or facilitates
Strait of Hormuz	Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman
Bab-el-Mandeb	Red Sea and Gulf of Aden
Strait of Malacca	Andaman Sea and South China Sea
Suez Canal	Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea
Panama Canal	Atlantic and Pacific maritime routes

E. What Is a Proxy Conflict?

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A proxy conflict occurs when external powers support local actors to pursue strategic objectives without necessarily fighting one another directly.

Support may include weapons, funding, intelligence, training or political backing.

The Yemen conflict has a regional dimension involving Iranian support for the Houthis and Saudi support for Yemen's internationally recognised government. However, the conflict also has important domestic causes, including political fragmentation and competition for territorial control.

F. What Is International Humanitarian Law?

International humanitarian law regulates the conduct of parties during armed conflict and seeks to limit human suffering.

Key principles include:

1. Distinction: Parties must distinguish civilians and civilian objects from military objectives.
2. Proportionality: Attacks must not cause excessive expected civilian harm in relation to the anticipated concrete and direct military advantage.
3. Precautions: Parties must take feasible precautions to minimise civilian harm.

4. Protection of civilians: Civilians and civilian infrastructure enjoy protection under applicable international humanitarian law.

Airports may qualify as civilian objects or, depending on the circumstances, become military objectives under international humanitarian law. Their status must be assessed according to the applicable rules and facts.

G. Why Does the Conflict Matter to India?

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- Energy security: Disruptions to maritime routes can affect energy transportation costs and supply reliability.
- Trade: Longer shipping routes can increase freight costs and delivery times.
- Indian diaspora: Regional instability can create safety and evacuation concerns for Indian nationals.
- Aviation: Threats to airports and airspace can cause flight cancellations, rerouting and travel uncertainty.
- Diplomacy: India has interests in maintaining regional stability and constructive relations with countries across West Asia.

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Relevance for UPSC

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- GS Paper II: India's relations with West Asian countries and regional groupings.
- GS Paper II: International institutions, diplomacy and conflict resolution.
- GS Paper III: Energy security, international trade and supply-chain disruptions.
- GS Paper I: Location of important geographical features and strategic waterways.
- Essay: Regional conflicts, civilian protection and the importance of diplomacy.