A CONSTRUCTIVIST ANALYSIS OF THE HOUTHI ATTACKS ON US MERCHANT SHIPS IN THE RED SEA IN 2023–2024

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ABSTRACT

The Houthi attacks on United States commercial vessels in the Red Sea during 2023–2024 have drawn global attention to maritime security dynamics and regional conflicts. This study aims to analyze the ideas, identities, and narratives that shape Houthi actions through the lens of constructivism in international relations. Employing a qualitative approach and in-depth case study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with global security experts and content analysis of official Houthi statements and international media coverage. Findings indicate that Houthi actions are not solely driven by military objectives but are also motivated by ideas of solidarity with Gaza, the collective identity of the Arab world, and a Global South resistance against Western hegemony. Furthermore, Shia ideology reinforces the alliance with Iran as Houthi's primary backer, with suspicions of major power involvement such as China within a proxy war context. Houthi narratives frame the attacks as a moral and political struggle against global injustice, resonating broadly across the region. The study underscores the importance of ideational and identity dimensions in understanding contemporary conflict dynamics and recommends strengthening narrative analysis in international security studies.

Keywords: Constructivism, Houthi, Red Sea

INTRODUCTION

The Red Sea region is one of the world's strategic areas in terms of geopolitics, geostrategy, and economics. Located at a strategic crossroads between Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, the region is not only a strategic trade route but also close to natural resources such as oil. Therefore, the Red Sea region has become a conflict-prone area for many state and non-state actors who often use it as an arena for competing interests (Ashine, 2024). The conflicts that occur are not only in terms of territorial disputes,

resources, and political influence, but also in terms of identity, ideology, and the intervention of dominant global powers.

One of the conflicts that occurred was the conflict between the Houthis and the United States. In recent years, the Houthis have been in the international spotlight. The Houthis themselves are an armed group based in Yemen. At the end of 2023 to early 2024, there were a number of incidents of attacks carried out by the Houthis on US-flagged cargo ships and tankers as well as ships operated by US companies. These ships were targeted by ballistic missiles and armed drones launched from Houthi territory. These attacks not only disrupted global trade activities but also triggered a military response from US forces operating in the region (Nandini, Syamsul Maarif, Syamsunasir, 2024). The attack shows that the Houthis' strategy cannot be underestimated. Armed with their strategy, they dared to openly confront a military force that was technologically superior.

The involvement of the Houthis in tensions in the Red Sea region as a non-state actor reflects how non-state actors are capable of changing the global political order, which has long been dominated by states as the main actors. This is consistent when analyzed through the constructivist theory approach, specifically soft constructivism as proposed by Alexander Wendt, who argues that the structure of the international system is not only shaped by material forces but also by ideas, identities, and norms. From a constructivist perspective, global political reality is the result of social construction influenced by perceptions, values, and interactions between actors (Mengshu, 2020). Wendt also emphasized that international relations are determined more by shared ideas than by material power. He rejected the views of neorealism and neoliberalism, which emphasize material aspects, and stated that social structures are formed through socially shared knowledge (Wendt, 2005). While acknowledging the existence of material factors, Wendt asserts that shared ideas are the most decisive factor in international interactions. He calls this view rump materialism (Wendt, 2005). This is the core of Wendt's non-materialist argument, which disagrees with neorealist and neoliberal theories that consider structures to be shaped by material phenomena. In constructivism, there are two important elements as tools for interpreting phenomena based on its basic assumptions. These are identity and idea.

According to Wendt, identity in international relations is not fixed or predetermined, but rather formed and developed through the process of social interaction between countries. Countries, as actors with legal systems, sovereignty, and claims to the legitimate use of force, did exist before interaction, and had basic interests such as physical security, autonomy, economic welfare, and collective pride. However, the concept of who they are (identity) and the interests they have is not static, but is shaped, maintained, and even changed through continuous practice and interaction with other states. In other words, the identity of a state and its interests are interrelated and develop dynamically based on experiences and social relationships with other actors, so that international anarchy becomes something that is "created" by the states themselves, not a permanent condition (Thomson et al., 2012; Wendt, 2005).

According to Alexander Wendt, anarchy in international relations is not something that is fixed or natural, but rather is formed through a process of social interaction between countries. The type of anarchy that is created—whether cooperative or competitive—depends on how countries form their identities and how they identify others: as partners or as threats. When the identity that develops is positive and collective, states will be more inclined to view security as a shared responsibility and act prosocially. Conversely, if the identity that is formed is negative and egoistic, then states will view security as their own business and act more individualistically. Therefore, for Wendt, the identity that is formed through interaction is key in determining the form of security culture or "culture of anarchy" in the international system (Thomson et al., 2012).

Then, "ideas" or concepts are very important in determining international social and political reality, according to constructivism, especially the approach developed by Alexander Wendt. Constructivism differs from materialist approaches such as realism and liberalism, which emphasize military capabilities or rational interests. According to constructivism, social structures such as identity, interests, and even the international system are constructed through shared ideas that are internalized by actors. These ideas not only influence how a country views itself and others; they also determine whether international relations are framed in terms of friendship, competition, or hostility. In other words, the international world is not something that is "given" objectively; rather, it is formed intersubjectively through collective beliefs and practices (Wendt, 2005).

The most important ideational factor in human interaction is widely shared or "intersubjective" beliefs, which cannot be reduced to individuals, and these shared beliefs shape the interests and identities of purposeful actors (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). These shared norms and beliefs create a collective framework of understanding that enables actors to act in accordance with socially agreed identities and interests (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Therefore, the identities and interests of actors are not fixed, but are shaped by shared beliefs that are continuously negotiated in an intersubjective social context.

In their efforts to establish independent causal forces for norms and ideas, many constructivist studies emphasize how ideas and norms contradict or undermine conventional concepts of the powerful interests of states. Human rights norms, which are the preferences of the weak, have been shown to prevail against powerful actors and states; environmental norms prevail over the interests of large corporations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). Furthermore, Katzenstein (1996) argues that social and cultural norms that are strategically internalized within a community can encourage actions that are consistent with their identity, even if these actions contradict the logic of power or economic interests. Therefore, to understand the dynamics of conflict and violence, a material analysis is not sufficient; it is also necessary to consider how identity and norms shape perceptions, moral legitimacy, and the legitimacy of these actions (Rhynhold, 2015).

In this context, the existence and actions of non-state actors such as the Houthis cannot be understood solely through a military or economic perspective, but also in terms of how they interpret their role and identity on the international stage. Constructivism explains that identity shapes interests. The Houthis, for example, position themselves as protectors of Yemeni national identity against foreign intervention and as part of an anti-Western and anti-Israel "axis of resistance." This identity then drives political and military actions that directly affect global security, such as attacks on US commercial ships. These attacks are not only physical attacks, but also symbols of resistance against the dominance of the international system. Furthermore, constructivism views international norms as changeable and reconstructable through interactions between actors, including non-state actors. The Houthis' success in disrupting international trade routes shows that non-state actors can become creators of new norms.

The questions in this study are how the construction of ideas and identities formed by Houthi underlies his attacks on US commercial ships in the Red Sea region, and why Houthi chose to attack commercial ships rather than US military ships.

METHOD

This study uses qualitative research methods. According to Denzine and Lincoln, qualitative research is an activity that places researchers in the world being studied (Abdussamad, 2021). It consists of a series of material and interpretive practices that make the world visible. These practices turn reality into a set of representations, such as field notes, conversations, photographs, recordings, and personal memos. Qualitative research involves a naturalistic and interpretative approach to understanding social phenomena. Furthermore, as explained by Abdussamad, the qualitative approach is part of naturalistic inquiry, which requires humans as instruments. The researcher functions as the main instrument, meaning that they must understand, interpret, and adapt to the social situations encountered throughout the research process(Abdussamad, 2021). In this study, qualitative research methods are used to identify the core problem and guide the data collection process. The author relies on secondary data gathered through document research, including e-books, academic journals, credible news sources, and other relevant literature. To process the data, this study applies a descriptive-qualitative analysis. The author reviews, categorizes, and interprets the collected documents to identify key themes and patterns related to the research problem. This approach allows the study to construct an analytical narrative based on the relationships found across the various sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In conducting this research, we reviewed several journal articles as reference sources and conducted an in-depth study of the contents of these journals so that our research could fill the gaps that did not exist in other studies. We collected similar literature to discuss the reasons why the Houthis attacked US ships in the Red Sea.

First, an article entitled "Critical Geopolitics in the Context of Maritime Security: A Case Study of the Houthi Rebels in the Red Sea" written by Yunias Dao et al. explains critical geopolitics and its impact on maritime security in the Red Sea, using the Houthi rebel group as the main case study. This study analyzes how Houthi activities, including attacks on commercial ships, have disrupted global trade routes connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa, and increased military tensions in the region. Using a qualitative approach and case studies, the authors identify that Houthi actions are changing regional and global power dynamics, and recommend the need for a multilateral approach that integrates maritime patrols, active diplomacy, and local capacity building. The main objective of this study is to fill a gap in the literature on the role of non-state actors such as the Houthis in shaping international maritime geopolitics. The conclusion emphasizes that effective solutions must address the root political and economic problems in Yemen (Dao, 2025).

Second, a similar article entitled "Yemen's Houthi Interests: Red Sea Blockade, Drone Attacks, and Ballistic Missile Strikes on Israel," written by Bangkit Adi Saputra, presents an in-depth analysis of the national interests underlying the actions of Yemen's Houthi group, including the blockade of the Bab al-Mandab Strait and direct military attacks on Israel, as a form of tangible support for the Palestinian people. Using qualitative library research methods, this study identifies four main aspects of Houthi interests: defense interests (demonstrating strength and alliance with Iran), economic interests (weakening Israel's economy and cutting off logistical supplies), world order interests (continuous support for Hamas, in line with Hezbollah and Iran), and ideological interests (attracting domestic sympathy, consolidating Shiite influence, and promoting international recognition as the legitimate government of Yemen). Overall, this analysis argues that the Houthis' involvement in regional conflicts is an attempt to demonstrate their existence to the international community (Bangkit Adi Saputra, 2024).

Third, the article entitled "Implications of the Conflict Between the United States and Britain with the Houthi Group (Yemen) in the Red Sea in Relation to the Global Geopolitical Situation and Its Impact on Indonesia" written by Komang Teguh Ardana and Jarot Wicaksono presents an in-depth analysis of the implications of the conflict between the United States -UK and the Houthi Group in Yemen on the global geopolitical situation, especially in the Red Sea. The authors argue that the Houthis' unilateral blockade of ships deemed to be supporting Israel, in retaliation for the Gaza conflict, has triggered military attacks by the US and UK, which in turn has increased global transportation costs as ships must detour via the Cape of Good Hope. Geopolitically, this situation highlights the firm support of the US and Britain for Israel and has sparked debate about the legality of military action in the Red Sea and the status of the Houthi Group as a combatant entity. This article also discusses the economic and political impact of the conflict on Indonesia, which could potentially face increased logistics costs but has so far focused on its humanitarian mission in Gaza (Ardana & Wicaksono, 2024).

From the literature above and the in-depth study that we have done, we have not found any scholars who have researched how the Houthi attitude towards the United States is manifested using a constructivist framework using the analysis tool of Houthi ideas and identities in carrying out attacks on United States ships in the Red Sea, this is a gap in this research because many articles that have been studied discuss the Houthi as rebels, but in this research we use another perspective that the resistance carried out by the Houthi is based on their ideas and identities towards solidarity with Gaza.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Alexander Wendt's Constructivism Theory

Constructivism is a theoretical approach that emerged in the study of International Relations, arguing that international reality is the result of social construction (Wendt, 1995). This approach challenges materialist views such as realism and liberalism, which tend to see international reality as something objective and determined by material factors such as military or economic power. Constructivism, on the other hand, sees international reality as largely the result of ideas, norms, and identities that are formed and maintained through social interaction and practice. Alexander Wendt, one of the leading figures who formulated structural constructivism, developed ideas that attempt to bridge the classic debate between agents and structures in international relations. Wendt argues that the structure of the international system is essentially social, formed through shared knowledge, collective practices, and the meanings that states assign to their own actions and those of other states (Wendt, 1999). Wendt's contribution is significant because he does not reject the existence of structures in the international system, but rather offers a new perspective that these structures are shaped by ideational dimensions that ultimately influence how states define their interests and identities (Wendt, 1992).

The fundamental idea proposed by Wendt is that international relations cannot be adequately understood simply by looking at the distribution of material power among states, but must be viewed from the social meaning attached to that power (Wendt, 1999). Wendt illustrates this argument by stating that the five hundred nuclear weapons possessed by Britain have a very different meaning for the United States than the five hundred nuclear weapons possessed by North Korea, even though the threat is materially the same (Wendt, 1999). This difference occurs not because of different material capabilities, but because of different social meanings constructed through a history of interaction, friendly or hostile relations, and the identities that have been formed between these countries. In Wendt's view, the structure of the international system is essentially intersubjective, meaning that it does not exist independently outside the minds of the actors, but is formed and maintained through shared understanding and social practices carried out by countries (Wendt, 1994). This means that anarchy in the international system, often viewed as a natural condition that determines state behavior, is actually a social construct that can change depending on how states interact and define their relationships with one another. Thus, Wendt opens up the possibility of

understanding that change in international relations is possible through the transformation of ideas and identities, not only through changes in the distribution of material power.

The main constructivist assumption in Wendt's thinking is that identity is the foundation that shapes actors' interests in the international system. Wendt explicitly states that "interests presuppose identities because an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is." (Wendt, 1999). This statement has profound implications that a country's national interests are not something natural or a given, but rather a product of how that country understands its own identity and the identities of other countries in the context of established social relations (Wendt, 1992). This means that the concept of identity in Wendt's constructivism has relational characteristics, which means that a country's identity is not formed in isolation, but rather through relationships and interactions with other countries. This relational identity arises from a process of "mirroring," in which a country defines itself based on how other countries treat and view it, as well as how it views other countries in the context of reciprocal relations (Wendt, 1994).

For example, a country that identifies itself as a democratic power will have different interests than a country that identifies itself as authoritarian, even if both have equal material capabilities. Furthermore, a country's interests are also shaped by how it views other actors as enemies, rivals, or partners, which ultimately influences the strategies and actions it takes (Wendt, 1999). By placing identity as a variable that precedes interests, Wendt challenges the assumption of rationalism that sees interests as something fixed and objectively identifiable. Instead, Wendt's constructivism asserts that interests are dynamic and can change along with the transformation of identity that occurs through the processes of socialization, learning, and interaction in the international system.

The second assumption of constructivism according to Wendt's thinking relates to how to understand anarchy in the international system. While realists view anarchy as the absence of a world government that regulates states, which is also seen as a condition that naturally encourages states to compete and conflict, Wendt offers a different view. According to Wendt, "anarchy has no logic apart from the practices that create and instantiate one structure of identities and interests rather than another." (Wendt, 1992). The meaning of this statement is that anarchy itself does not automatically determine how countries should behave. What determines this is how countries interact and build a common understanding of their relationships with one another. Wendt rejects the deterministic view that anarchy inevitably leads to mistrust and power struggles. Instead, he argues that in a mutually anarchic system, states can form very different types of relationships, ranging from conflict-ridden hostility (Hobbesian culture), competitive relationships that still respect each other's sovereignty (Lockean culture), or even cooperative and trusting relationships (Kantian culture), depending on how they construct their identities and interests through social interaction (Wendt, 1999).

To understand how anarchy can produce diverse patterns of relations, Wendt emphasizes the importance of socialization and interaction between states in shaping the meaning of anarchy. Essentially, states do not enter the international system with a preconceived understanding of how they should behave; rather, they learn through historical experience and repeated interaction with other states (Wendt, 1992). When countries interact consistently in certain ways, for example by respecting each other's sovereignty, sharing information, or cooperating in multilateral institutions, they will gradually build a collective identity and shared norms that shape expectations about how their relationship will unfold in the future (Wendt, 1994). Conversely, if countries continue to interact through conflict, threats, and competition, they will construct an understanding that the international system is an arena of hostility where trust cannot be built. Thus, anarchy can produce competitive, cooperative, or even conflictual patterns of relations, not because of the intrinsic nature of anarchy itself, but because of the social practices developed by countries through their historical experiences and socialization processes.

The third assumption that forms the main pillar of Wendt's constructivism is his view of the structure of the international system. Wendt explicitly states that "the deep structure of anarchy is cultural, not material," meaning that the deepest foundation of the international anarchic structure is not material elements such as weaponry, technology, or economics, but rather the ideas, norms, and symbolic meanings shared by the actors (Wendt, 1999). From this, we can see that Wendt argues that although material factors such as military or economic capabilities are indeed important, their significance is determined by the ideas and social meanings attached to them. The existence of such social structures is not static or permanent, but rather highly dynamic and continuously produced and reproduced through social practices, discourse, and repeated interactions between states (Wendt, 1992). Then, when countries consistently engage in certain practices and share the same discourse, they reinforce and maintain existing social structures. However, when these practices and discourses change, either due to the emergence of new ideas, changes in domestic norms, or responses to crises, social structures can also undergo transformation. Thus, Wendt offers an optimistic perspective on the possibility of change in international relations, because if structures are built by ideas, then changes in ideas can produce fundamental structural changes, without having to wait for major shifts in the distribution of material power.

Houthi and US Identity as Determinants of Interests

The Houthi movement builds its identity of resistance through the construction of ideology, which can be seen in slogans and political symbols scattered throughout Yemen's public spaces. The identity of the enemy they have constructed is clearly evident in a slogan quoted by Al Jazeera: "Allah is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Damn the Jews, Victory for Islam"(Wiacek, 2012). This slogan has become a unifying symbol for the pro-Houthi community, found on walls, checkpoints, houses, clothing, and everyday objects. This narrative creates a clear boundary between "us" and

"them," which serves to legitimize acts of aggression against actors who have been designated as enemies. The construction of hostility towards the United States is further reinforced by Abdul Malik al-Houthi's recent statement that his group will "respond to American enemies with missile attacks and target warships and naval vessels" (Rahma, 2025). This statement shows that attacks against the United States are not spontaneous acts, but rather part of an identity framework that has been built ideologically and politically.

During the period 2023–2024, the Houthis launched a series of attacks on commercial ships affiliated with the US and Israel, including acts of piracy as a form of solidarity with Gaza. A major attack occurred when an anti-ship ballistic missile struck a US container ship, the M/V Gibraltar Eagle, in the Red Sea (Mongilio, 2025). The US government then issued an official advisory for US-flagged ships to avoid the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in response to the increased Houthi threat. A U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report noted that this event caused a 90 percent decline in container ship movements from December 2023 to February 2024 (DIA, 2024). In this case, the United States also built its identity rhetoric about the Houthis by referring to the group as "terrorist actors," "Iranian proxies," and "a threat to international navigation" (News, 2025). These labels shaped the framework of the US position as an actor tasked with maintaining global trade stability, ensuring maritime security, and countering threats to its hegemony. The United States claims that the Houthis are a terrorist group that disrupts trade stability, arguing that the Houthis' attacks are acts of terrorism.

The Houthis have built their identity as a "resistance movement" through anti-American and anti-Israel slogans, visual symbols, narratives of solidarity with Gaza, and explicit statements by the group's leaders. This identity positions the United States as an existential enemy, not merely a political opponent. This identity of resistance provides moral and collective legitimacy for their violent actions, including attacks on US merchant ships. Conversely, the United States has built an identity as a "guardian of global order." This is reflected in the labeling of the Houthis as terrorists and a threat to navigation, as well as policy responses that emphasize maritime security and economic stability. This identity leads the US to view any disruption to international trade routes as a threat to its hegemonic role in the world order.

Referring to Alexander Wendt's theory, actors "do not know what they want until they know who they are."(Wendt, 2005). The identity that the Houthis have constructed as a resistance group has resulted in an interest in opposing US hegemony through symbolic and strategic means. Seeing themselves as "defenders of Palestine" and part of the anti-imperialist narrative, the Houthis chose to target US commercial ships in order to undermine Western economic dominance and symbolic power. On the other hand, the US identity as the guardian of order makes its interests focused on retaliation, punishment, and securing international sea lanes. The Houthi threat is seen not only as a military disturbance, but as a threat to the legitimacy and image of the US as a global hegemon responsible for the security of world trade.

The Houthi attacks on US commercial ships cannot be understood solely as a military calculation, but as an expression of a resistance identity built through discourse, symbols, and ideological legitimacy. Similarly, the US response to these attacks is not merely a matter of material security policy, but an effort to maintain its identity as a global hegemon that upholds international order. Thus, this conflict is an interaction of identities that mutually construct the interests of each actor, in line with the constructivist perspective.

The Production of Red Sea Anarchy through Practice, Perception, and Interaction

In one study, the United States is described as positioning itself as the guardian of the international order in the Middle East, framing each of its military actions as part of its responsibility to maintain global stability. This narrative is then used to justify the launch of Operation Prosperity Guardian, which is presented as a response to the increasing Houthi attacks on commercial vessels and considered a threat to the security of international trade routes. Although the Pentagon is portrayed as reluctant to escalate the situation further, the study indicates that the United States nonetheless carried out strikes on Houthi bases and vessels as a way to preserve its image as a military power while simultaneously distancing itself from the broader complexities of the regional conflict. This overall explanation demonstrates that the claim of maintaining global stability functions as a legitimizing basis for the United States to conduct military action against the Houthis in the Red Sea (Pradesh, 2025).

The United States is also depicted as framing Houthi attacks as a direct threat to "global trade" and "international stability," allowing its military actions in the Red Sea to be presented as measures "necessary to protect international shipping lanes and prevent broader regional destabilization." The U.S. government is likewise described as "repeatedly emphasizing the need to safeguard global trade routes as a justification for conducting strikes on Houthi infrastructure," making the rhetoric of global stability function as the "primary legal and moral basis" for American military involvement in the Red Sea (Eavers, 2023).

In his statement on the platform X, senior Houthi official Mohammed al-Bukhaiti asserted that the group would not halt its military operations even if the United States succeeded in mobilizing international support, emphasizing that they would continue "no matter what sacrifices must be paid." He added that Houthi attacks would only cease if "Israel's crimes in Gaza are stopped and food, medicine, and fuel are allowed to enter for the besieged population," underscoring that their military actions are directly tied to the humanitarian conditions and ongoing aggression in Gaza (Aljazeera, 2023). This reinforces that the Houthi narrative frames the Red Sea as an arena of political jihad, with a clear assertion that their attacks will not cease as long as the conflict in Gaza continues.

Based on these various pieces of data, the researcher argues that the Red Sea is currently confronted with two competing narratives that even trigger a contest over interpretive dominance. The first is the United States' narrative, which frames the Red

Sea as a vital international waterway; anyone who disrupts this route is portrayed by the U.S. as threatening global stability. The second is the Houthi narrative, which interprets the Red Sea as a field of political *jihad*, where the route is highly strategic and indirectly functions as an economic corridor for Western states, a condition that the Houthis then leverage as a bargaining position in relation to the unresolved Gaza conflict.

This narrative contest produces a process of constructing anarchy. The way anarchy operates is not something natural, but rather emerges through a stage of social construction. Zehfuss, in several of her explanations, states that for Wendt, anarchy does not stand on its own but is formed through how states interact with one another and assign meaning to their relationships. Therefore, whether anarchy is perceived as a threat or instead as a space for cooperation depends heavily on the identities and perspectives that states build toward one another (Zehfuss, n.d.). In the Red Sea conflict, the researcher observes that the anarchy in this region is not a natural form of anarchy as assumed by the realists, but rather a constructed anarchy shaped through the interactions between the United States and its allies and the Houthi forces and their allies.

What becomes clearly visible is that the actions taken by the Houthis are grounded in an openly stated refusal to accept any form of Western hegemony and domination— something that most Global South countries, and more specifically Middle Eastern states, do not explicitly do. This indicates that the Houthis are not only producing anarchy, but also a *production of fear*. Fear becomes a strategic weapon for the Houthis due to their proximity to the Red Sea, which is a vital global route, particularly for the vessels of hegemonic states. This, in turn, becomes a bargaining position for the Houthis.

Social Structure and the Struggle for Meaning in the Houthi–United States Conflict

The conflict between the Houthis and the United States in the Red Sea reveals a contradiction between material and ideational structures in determining the behavior of international actors. The United States has more dominant military power as a superpower, while the Houthis only have asymmetric capabilities based on missiles and drones, but the Houthis continue their actions despite the risk of retaliation. The Houthi ideology provides a normative foundation that frames their attacks as moral acts, not aggression.

The conflict between the Houthis and the United States in the Red Sea reflects not only military interactions but also a battle of meanings rooted in the construction of identity, ideology, and the legitimacy of each actor's actions. In an official speech in December 2023, Abdul-Malik Al-Houthi stated, "We attack ships associated with Israel as part of our religious duty and solidarity with the Palestinian people." (Security Council, 2024). In addition, Houthi also stated, "If Gaza does not receive the food and medicine it needs, all ships in the Red Sea heading for Israeli ports, regardless of their nationality, will be targeted by our armed forces" (Al Jazeera, 2023). These statements show that Houthi ideology frames military action as an expression of solidarity with Palestine, resistance to the United States and Israel. This identity then shapes political

interests and moral justifications; their actions are consistent with the constructivist concept that identity is more important than interests (Wendt, 1999)**.**

Materially, the disparity between the United States and the Houthis is striking. The United States has superior military capabilities such as aircraft carriers, fighter jets, and long-range intelligence support in the region, while the Houthis rely on anti-ship missiles and drones. A Defense Intelligence Agency report confirms that although the Houthis have limited material capabilities, they have launched hundreds of attacks that have impacted international trade routes, indicating that material capacity is not the only motive behind their actions (Agency, 2024). Thus, researchers argue that the structure of this conflict is better understood through a constructivist perspective, in line with Wendt's view that the deepest structure of international relations is cultural, not material (Wendt, 1999).

Wendt emphasizes that the deepest structure of the international system is cultural, where identity and ideas shape interests so that actions can be interpreted as reasonable based on that identity framework (Wendt, 1999). This principle helps to understand why, despite the material risks, the Houthis carried out attacks on American commercial ships, as these actions were morally justified by their ideology and collective narrative (Wendt, 1999). Therefore, the researcher argues that the Houthis' ideology, based on solidarity with Palestine, produced internal legitimacy for attacking commercial ships that were considered to be associated with their political opponents. With this legitimacy, material risks are no longer an obstacle; their actions are interpreted as a moral obligation that strengthens their collective identity.

On the other hand, the United States consistently frames its response within the context of international norms. An official statement from the US Department of Defense asserts that attacks on commercial ships "threaten freedom of navigation and the global economy, and the United States will uphold the rules-based international order" (Department of War, 2023). This statement positions retaliatory actions as normative measures to maintain a system that allows global trade to continue functioning smoothly. Researchers view the interaction between the Houthis' actions and the American retaliatory attacks as reproducing and reinforcing the meaning structures of each party, with the conflict serving as an arena for the formation of new international norms and identities.

This conflict can be understood as a contest between two meaning structures: the Houthis use attacks as a representation of moral resistance and solidarity, while the United States uses military responses to reinforce norms and global stability. The attacks and counterattacks that occur are not merely material interactions between actors, but rather a battle of identity and legitimacy over what is considered legitimate in international politics. In line with the idea of constructivism, the researcher argues that the actions of both actors show that global politics is not only constructed through material power, but also through the meaning, symbols, and identities attached to their actions.

CONCLUSION

The attacks carried out by the Houthi group against US commercial ships in the Red Sea in 2023–2024 reflect the complex ideological and identity dimensions in the dynamics of regional conflict. These actions are not merely military acts, but also a manifestation of a collective identity based on solidarity with the people of Gaza and ideological closeness to Iran as their main patron. The attacks are positioned as a form of resistance against the symbols of global capitalism identified with the United States and its allies, and are interpreted as a strategic effort to weaken US economic and logistical support for Israel's military aggression. By targeting commercial ships rather than military targets, the Houthis are not only trying to disrupt international trade routes, but also framing their actions as a form of delegitimization of a global system that is considered unequal. In this context, the Houthis' actions can be read as a strategy of producing fear and psychological pressure directed at Western interests, while also reinforcing the Houthis' position in the narrative of regional resistance to Western hegemony in the Middle East.

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