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YEMEN: Houthi Rebels Will Likely Shut Down All Trade Conducting in the Red Sea

Summary: On 6 March, Houthi militants ramped up attacks, causing fatalities for the first time. This escalation underscores the growing threat posed by the Houthi rebels to maritime security in the area. Given the increased frequency and intensity of these attacks, Houthi militants will likely continue to pursue aggressive tactics targeting commercial vessels passing through the Red Sea. This will almost certainly influence all ships to take a different route to negate possible attacks from the Houthis, avoiding the Red Sea entirely.

Background: On 6 March, a Houthi missile attack on the Barbados-flagged cargo ship True Confidence attack killed three sailors, according to *Al Jazeera*. The Iran-backed Houthi militant group started attacking ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, claiming it was a response to Israel's continuing war in Gaza, according to *Al Jazeera*. The attack on True Confidence marks the first attack causing fatalities. On 19 November 2023, Houthis hijacked a British-owned, Japanese-operated commercial ship in the Red Sea, according to The Iran Primer. On 3 December 2023, Houthis fired ballistic missiles at three commercial ships in the Red Sea, according to The Iran Primer. On 12 February, Houthis fired two missiles at a cargo ship bound for Bandar Khomeini in Iran, the main backer of the Houthis war in Yemen, according to CBS News. On 18 February, two anti-ship ballistic missiles launched from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen at the British-owned carrier MV Rubymar, according to CNBC. Between 19 November 2023, and 25 February, the Houthis launched at least 57 attacks on commercial and military ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, according to AP News.

Iran Backing the Houthis: The root cause of Houthi violence potentially results from Iran remaining the Houthis number one backer. Since 2015, Iran continues to provide a diverse arsenal of short and medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles, including anti-ship variants, enabling Houthi attacks on land and at sea, according to the Defense Intelligence Agency. Iran provides the Houthis with weapons, drones, training, and intelligence information, according to Reuters. Houthi spokesperson Abdulsalam said "We don't deny that we have a relationship with Iran and that we have benefited from the Iranian experience in training and military manufacturing and capabilities," according to Reuters. Without the help of Iran, the Houthi rebels would not possess the means to attack ships passing through Yemen's neighboring waters. Due to Iranian-backed Houthi Rebels, major shipping companies, because they are not willing to

face the risk of attacks, will almost certainly opt for 1,000-nautical mile longer routes that cost more and require more fuel.

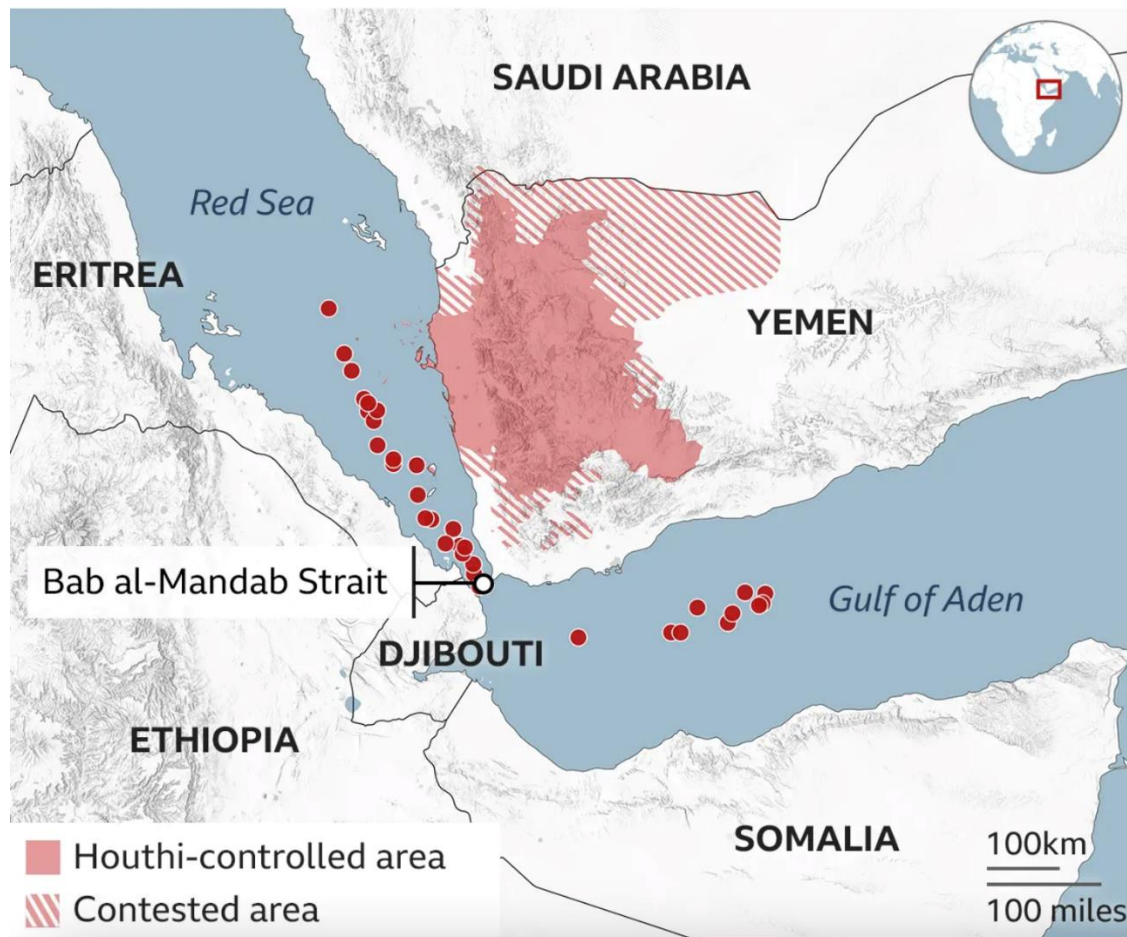


Figure 1: A map of Iranian-backed Houthi rebel attacks that damaged shipping off the coast of Yemen, as of December 2023.

Shipping Companies get Diverted: As attacks on vessels in the Red Sea progress, more shipping companies will likely convert their routes to go a longer and more expensive way. On 22 December 2023, the Global Logistics Group said it rerouted more than 25 vessels around Africa over the previous week, according to Reuters. Hundreds of giant container ships, some more than 300m (984ft) long, now choose a lengthy detour around the continent of Africa instead of heading up the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal on voyages from Asia to Europe, according to BBC. Houthi attacks prevent vessels from passing through Yemen's waters successfully, prompting them to choose the safer route of traveling down and around Southern Africa through the Cape of Good Hope. Before the war in Gaza, routes from Asia to Europe used

to take around 19 days, going through the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal. Going around the southern tip of Africa can take up to 31 days, according to the Washington Institute. Not only does this take longer, but it costs much more in fuel.

Outlook and Implications: The attacks on ships in the Red Sea will likely result in an end to all trade passing through waters bordering Yemen. Though the Red Sea holds responsibility for 15% of global trade and 20% of global container shipping, repercussions will likely become more severe as uncertainties continue. Shipping companies will likely opt to take the route through the Cape of Good Hope. This will almost certainly double the cost of global shipping, which could, in turn, inflate consumer prices. The Houthis could potentially continue to attack ships after the potential ceasefire in Gaza to maintain their global profile.

[Kate Hagopian]

GEORGIA: Russia Likely to Intensify Election Interference Efforts

Summary: Moscow will likely intensify its social media disinformation and cyberattack campaigns soon to influence the Georgian parliamentary elections and increase Moscow's influence over Tbilisi's policy decisions. If Tbilisi drastically shifted its policies in favor of the West or Georgian civil society, forced pro-Western changes to the makeup of the political regime, Moscow may utilize economic warfare, but this likely will not occur due to capacity limitations resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war.

Background: Georgia will hold elections in October 2024. Moscow's four most common tools for exerting influence abroad include cyberattacks, social media disinformation, economic warfare, and military action. In 2019, a state-sponsored Russian cyberattack campaign shut down over 2,000 Georgian websites after mass protests against a Russian parliament member's speech in the Georgian parliament forced Irakli Kobakhidze, current Prime Minister and then-Speaker of the Parliament, to resign. Russia currently occupies 20% of Georgia. Russia invaded in 2008 due to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) promising Georgia eventual membership at its annual summit. Georgia became a European Union (EU) candidate in 2023.

Likely goals in the South Caucasus: Moscow likely wants to consolidate its influence over the South Caucasus. Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin and former president Dmitry Medvedev, repeatedly made references to Russia's right to an exclusive sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union in public statements. Moscow's desire to create and maintain this sphere of influence likely drives its extensive involvement in the South Caucasus. In 2023, revenue from Russia in the form of exports, tourism, and remittances amounted to 10.3% of the Georgian gross domestic product (GDP). Yerevan imports almost all its petroleum and grain from Russia. Yerevan also sends 40% of its exports to Russia. Until September 2023, Moscow had deep involvement in Yerevan's defense, sending considerable military aid to Yerevan while negotiating and maintaining the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moscow virulently opposes NATO expansion in the region, with Medvedev warning that war would break out if NATO attempted to admit Georgia. Moscow likely values this sphere of influence to improve its economy, maintain a buffer zone between Russia and potential enemies, increase its ability to project power abroad, and prevent potential pro-Western reformist movements from spreading to Russia and threatening the regime's stability. Moscow most likely

prefers the ruling Georgian Dream party to the Georgian opposition parties due to Georgian Dream’s comparatively pro-Russian position. Georgian Dream selected Kobakhidze as Prime Minister despite his 2019 ouster from the Speaker position for his pro-Russia actions, allowed Russia-Georgia flights to resume despite the ongoing Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and jailed Mikheil Saakashvili, former President of Georgia, former Governor of Odessa, and leader of the Rose Revolution who Putin strongly opposed. Under Georgian Dream, Georgia will likely not meet EU membership requirements. Tbilisi will likely not implement sanctions against Russia or make significant attempts to reduce the power of oligarchs due to the influence of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the de facto leader of Georgian Dream and oligarch who made his fortune in Russia.

Likely Tools in Interference Efforts:

Moscow likely intensifies its cyber and information warfare in a foreign country with the intention of interfering in that country’s elections. Patterns of Moscow-backed attacks against Ukrainian targets from May 2017 to May 2020, with Ukrainian elections in March and April 2019, demonstrate this.

From May 2019 to May 2020 and May 2017 to May 2018, Moscow-backed

actors did not carry out significant cyberattacks against Ukrainian targets. From May 2018 to May 2019, Moscow-backed actors carried out seven significant cyberattacks against Ukrainian targets. This drastic change indicates that Moscow almost certainly attacked due to the elections. Outside of election time periods, the number of Moscow-backed cyberattacks against foreign targets drastically increased since 2006, indicating that Moscow likely invested considerable resources in expanding their cyber capabilities and has grown increasingly comfortable with the prospect of using these capabilities as a tool to exert influence. In addition to these cyberattacks, Russia likely uses social media disinformation campaigns to influence elections. While the Internet Research Agency, Moscow’s most prominent social media disinformation agency, shut down in September 2023, Moscow most likely has other assets to continue this work.



Figure 1: Number of Cyber Attacks Conducted by Russia-Linked Cyber Crime Groups That Cause More Than \$1 Million in Damages

Unlikely potential methods: Moscow likely will not attempt to leverage its military or economic strength to influence the elections. Moscow likely wants to maintain its trade relationship with Tbilisi. The Russian economy faces significant downward pressures, although it maintains relative stability. 45 countries, including every Group of Seven member, imposed sanctions against Russian companies and individuals. Moscow likely uses trade with Georgia to evade these sanctions. In February 2024, Russian inflation hit 7.69%. Russian gross domestic product (GDP) declined by \$382 billion from 2022 to 2023, while GDP per capita declined by \$2.64 thousand. Russian government spending increased by \$16 billion over that period. Moscow almost certainly will not take actions likely to further harm their economy due to a need to maintain Russian citizens' standard of living and continue financing the Russia-Ukraine war. Thus, Moscow almost certainly does not want to alienate Georgia, an important trading partner that imported \$1.83 billion in Russian goods, including \$622 million in often-sanctioned refined petroleum, in 2022. Furthermore, attempting to exert pressure on the Georgian economy would likely result in Moscow's influence over Tbilisi decreasing. If Moscow exerted significant pressure against Georgia, this would likely push Tbilisi to diversify their trade faster and more extensively. This would lead to Russia's share in the Georgian economy decreasing, decreasing Moscow's future leverage. This would also likely result in increased anti-Russia sentiment amongst Georgian civilians, which could result in marginally pro-Russia politicians losing power.

Outlook and Implications: Moscow will likely intensify its cyberattacks against Georgian targets until October. These cyberattacks will likely target opposition candidates to find damaging information about them, which Moscow will leak to reduce its chances of winning the elections and ensure that the pro-Russian Georgian Dream party can maintain power. After October, Moscow will likely cease regular attacks against Georgian targets. Moscow will likely devote significant resources to cyberattacks and information warfare against Georgian targets due to Moscow's demonstrated interest in the South Caucasus. Moscow may slightly reduce the intensity of its cyber warfare operations against Georgian targets due to the Russia-Ukraine War and upcoming U.S. elections pulling Moscow's attention and resources away from Georgia, but it will likely devote some resources to Georgia given its greatly expanded capabilities and high willingness to use these capabilities. Because exerting economic pressure against Georgia would likely adversely impact Moscow's military capabilities, domestic support, and influence in the

South Caucasus, Moscow will almost certainly not attempt to impair the Georgian economy by sanctioning Georgian imports or imposing export restrictions. Rather, Moscow will likely attempt to increase the volume of trade between Russia and Georgia to improve Russia's economic performance and maintain Moscow's influence over Tbilisi. Moscow almost certainly will maintain the current occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to ensure that Georgia remains ineligible for NATO and EU membership due to participation in an ongoing armed border dispute. Moscow most likely will not significantly expand its military operations in Georgia due to its capacity limitations, likely already strained due to the Russia-Ukraine War.

Under certain circumstances, Moscow may alter these behaviors. Moscow will almost certainly restrict its actions as much as possible, using only the level of force that it sees as necessary to keep Tbilisi in Moscow's sphere of influence. Moscow likely sees social media disinformation campaigns as the least forceful option and may deploy them without significant events prompting their use. For example, an increasingly unified Georgian civil society may prompt Moscow to deploy disinformation warfare to increase internal strife as a preventative measure against potential reform movements. Moscow likely sees cyber warfare as the next tier of attack and would continue its use past October if significant events within Georgia that Moscow perceives as a threat to its interests occurred. Pro-Western mass protests, akin to the Rose Revolution, would likely cause Moscow to continue its cyberattacks past October. These cyberattacks would likely target Georgian civil groups and government infrastructure in conjunction with disinformation warfare to increase Georgian internal division by splitting the pro-Western faction. Major events that would definitively pull Tbilisi out of Moscow's sphere of influence would prompt intensive and costly interference efforts from Moscow. If Tbilisi drastically reduced Russia-Georgia trade, Moscow would almost certainly exert significant economic pressure against Tbilisi to force it to renounce these policies. If Georgia received a NATO Membership Action Plan or appeared likely to receive EU membership, this would almost certainly prompt Moscow to significantly expand their occupation of Georgia. Because the Georgian economy would likely collapse in the event of Russian sanctions and the Georgian military almost certainly could not stop the rapid advance of Russian troops, Tbilisi will almost certainly not take any action Moscow would interpret as cause for such extreme measures.

[Christina Muchow]

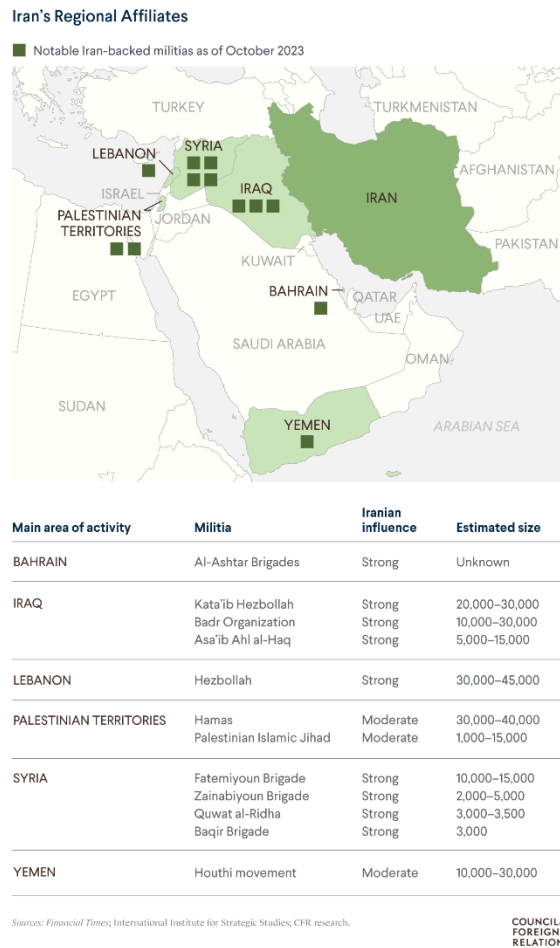
IRAN: Tehran's Use of Proxy Groups Likely to Escalate Conflict in the Middle East

Summary: Tehran's continued use and funding of proxy groups in several locations will likely escalate unrest in the Middle East. Tehran's "Axis of Resistance" will likely cause greater conflict as it continues attacks on Iranian enemies, allowing Tehran to deny any claims of involvement. This will likely lead to the direct involvement of Iran in hostilities with Middle Eastern nations.

Background: Since the 1979 Revolution, Tehran focused on funding and supporting proxy groups throughout the Middle East to expand its influence and military power over other countries in the area, according to the Wilson Center. Tehran executes attacks through its network of proxy groups, or the "Axis of Resistance," attributing them to those groups while avoiding direct responsibility. Tehran manages to retain strong control over most of its proxy groups due to the excessive amount of funding it provides them, giving them additional military strength throughout the Middle East. Tehran provides its proxy groups with over \$16 billion a year in funding, according to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Over the past few months, Iranian proxy groups claimed responsibility for attacks, while Tehran denied any involvement. International affairs experts speculate that Tehran not only provided significant funding but also helped these proxy groups successfully plan attacks, according to the Network for Strategic Analysis. In addition to large amounts of money, Tehran started providing its militia groups with dangerous and advanced weaponry, making their attacks more precise and destructive than before, according to the Wilson Center. The continuous escalation of Tehran's unwavering support for its extensive network of proxy groups not only undermines regional stability and security but also exacerbates existing tensions, heightening the risk of wider conflict and instability across the entire Middle East, according to *Foreign Policy*.

Iranian Control of Proxy Groups: Tehran proxy groups may act in accordance with their own principles and disregard Tehran's influence because they only receive Iranian funding and lack Iranian leadership. While Tehran currently retains strong influence over most of its proxy groups, some of them remain only moderately influenced, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. As these groups make decisions that do not align with Tehran's interests, lack of Iranian control may cause tension with Tehran and lead to further chaos throughout the Middle East. The possibility of Iran pulling funding and weapons from its proxy groups keeps its proxy

groups in line since the loss of Tehran’s bankrolling most likely detrimentally affects proxy groups’ missions.



Infographic showing Iranian influence, size, and location of proxy groups as of 2023.

Tehran Intentions to Remain Uninvolved: Tehran’s denial of responsibility and knowledge of events will likely continue in response to proxy group attacks throughout the Middle East. Tehran uses proxy groups to execute attacks against its enemies while remaining disaffiliated with their actions, claiming that it does not control what its proxy groups do, according to the Wilson Center. Iran continuing to fund, train, and weaponize these groups keep Iran indirectly connected to the attacks, even with Tehran’s denial of involvement. Tehran strategically supports these groups and will likely continue funding the proxy groups to maintain its “Axis of Resistance” to stand as a show of power throughout the region.

Outlook and Implications: Tehran's utilization of proxy groups will likely escalate conflict dynamics within the Middle East, potentially causing a troubling increase in unrest across the region. Operating under the banner of Tehran's "Axis of Resistance," these proxy groups will likely perpetrate attacks against perceived adversaries of Iran. This calculated approach not only enables Tehran to deflect accountability by denying any direct involvement but will likely set the stage for heightened confrontations and destabilizing repercussions. Though proxy groups may lack complete loyalty to Iran, the funding they receive likely prevents any opposition to Tehran and its ideas. Tehran will almost certainly continue to provide funding, training, and weapons to its proxy groups to appease them and show its military strength in the Middle East.

[Caileigh Tax]

MEXICO: Capture of Gulf Cartel Leader Likely to Cause Outburst of Violence

Summary: Mexican Navy personnel arrested José Alberto García Vilano, also known as La Kena, presumed to lead the Los Ciclonos faction of the Gulf Cartel. La Kena nearly secured release from prison when a judge deemed the evidence insufficient, but new charges emerged. The arrest of La Kena will likely trigger an outburst in Gulf Cartel violence as they strive to secure his release from prison.

Background: On 18 January, Navy personnel and state police apprehended La Kena in the metropolitan area of Monterrey. They captured him in a shopping mall located in one of the richest municipalities in Latin America, according to Mexico News Daily. The mall's facial recognition system identified him, leading to the arrest, according to The Rio Times. Coordination between the Marines and State Police allowed for the arrest to take place without any shots fired. La Kena's cartel, responsible for many attacks on US citizens, notably kidnapped four Americans in March of 2023, resulting in two deaths. Mexican authorities offered a reward of \$150,000 for any information that would lead to La Kena's arrest. La Kena faces kidnapping charges, but it remains unclear whether authorities charged him for the abduction of four Americans or the planned kidnapping of 31 migrants near Matamoros, according to Borderland Beat. La Kena's previous charges included illegal possession of firearms and organized crime involvement with the intent of drug trafficking, according to Borderland Beat.

Struggle for Power: The Gulf Cartel will likely struggle to maintain power in Tamaulipas as Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) fights for control over the region. With La Kena's arrest, the Gulf Cartel already struggles from within their ranks; a war with CJNG only worsens their problems. Although the Gulf Cartel's roots in Tamaulipas span a century, the CJNG may succeed in gaining control of crucial parts of the state. Reports of roadblocks on highways that connect Reynosa to Matamoros indicate that the CJNG is trying to stop the Gulf Cartel from mobilizing cartel members, according to InSight Crime.



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JOSÉ ALBERTO GARCÍA VILANO
ALIAS "LA KENA O CICLÓN 19"
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Figure 1: La Kena Wanted Poster

A Violent Message: The Gulf Cartel will likely resort to violence in hopes of sending a message to the Mexican Government. In 2019, authorities captured the son of Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzman. However, due to a spike in violence, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador called for his release, according to CNN. The Gulf Cartel will likely push Mexico City's hand to fight for La Kena's release. With new government elections coming up, the timing presents the perfect opportunity for the Gulf Cartel to take action. Influencing the election could potentially end in gaining impunity from the government, freeing La Kena.

Outlook and Implications: The gulf cartel will most likely use the upcoming government elections as a platform for violence. As the CJNG pursues a territory war with the Gulf Cartel, it is likely the Gulf Cartel could face instability from within. To regain stability the Gulf Cartel could replace La Kena with a different high-ranking member. Moving forward, cartels will likely continue pushing Mexico City's hand for a release of their high-ranking cartel members.

[Justin Doney]

About GSIS

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's (ERAU) Bachelor of Science in Global Security & Intelligence Studies (GSIS) degree program at our Prescott Campus blends both academic and professional studies to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become future leaders in intelligence, security, and law enforcement. The program provides students with a sound foundation in the liberal arts, including international relations, foreign languages and cultures, international law, foreign policy, political and military history, and other essential topics.

About EE

Eagle Eye Intelligence (EE) is an intelligence and research organization led by the students of the GSIS program at ERAU in Prescott, Arizona.

Dr. Philip E. Jones founded EE and Embry-Riddle's GSIS program in 2002, following a career with the Central Intelligence Agency and consulting work in international development and global security. Currently, Professor Dale R. Avery, a former career intelligence analyst, serves as EE's faculty advisor.

EE strives to provide actionable intelligence and analysis to its customers during the academic year. We are driven by a number of goals – continuous development, nonpartisanship, interdisciplinary studies, global awareness, and professionalism.

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Sebastien Bragg, a Junior in the GSIS program, currently serves as EE's Editor in Chief. For questions or comments, contact the team at editorsee@gmail.com or Professor Avery at 928.777.4708. If you use material from this publication, you should attribute: Eagle Eye Intelligence Edition 451, a publication created by students at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona.



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