

The Houthi Challenge

Forging a Strategy to Defeat the Iran-Backed Terror Group in Yemen

Ari Heistein

Foreword by Jonathan Schanzer

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Foreword

In 2019, before the COVID pandemic, a small delegation from Foundation for Defense of Democracies visited the Arabian Gulf. Amidst discussions of possible normalization with Israel and plans for economic diversification, we received a military briefing on Ansar Allah, the terrorist group also known as the Houthis.

The briefing was at once jarring and familiar. A terror proxy of Iran had established a significant presence in civil war-torn Yemen. Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps were on the ground, training the group to fight against the internationally recognized government of Yemen. The briefing was eerily similar to briefings we had received from the Israelis on their Iran-backed terrorism challenges, Hamas and Hezbollah. In fact, for years, the Hezbollahis were training the Houthis to attack neighboring states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The war launched by the Saudis in 2015 to combat the Houthis was unsuccessful. Their military lacked the precision and professionalism needed for this campaign. Yemeni civilians suffered the consequences. American pressure ultimately forced the Saudis to stand down in 2022.

In 2020, as the Trump administration prepared to vacate the White House, it placed Ansar Allah on the foreign terrorist organization (FTO) list. Days later, when the Biden team took over, they rescinded the designation. The threat never abated, however.

After the October 7 assault by Hamas on Israel and the war that subsequently erupted, the Houthis began to darken the skies over Israel with drones and missiles. Indeed, the Houthis were the first terrorist group in history to possess an arsenal of ballistic missiles. Those Iran-made missiles, along with Iranian drones, hurtled more than 1,000 miles across the Arabian Peninsula. The Israelis neutralized most of those attacks with their vaunted air defenses. But no defense is hermetic. The Houthis landed occasional blows. The Israelis responded with attacks of their own, sending aircraft the length of the Red Sea to bomb strategic targets in Houthi-controlled territory in 2024.

But Israel was not alone in the fight. U.S. naval vessels came under attack by the Houthis. So did other international vessels despite the U.S.-led "Operation Prosperity Guardian." The Biden administration launched occasional reprisals in Houthi territory. However, those strikes were tactical in nature. The Houthi threat persisted through early 2025, when Donald Trump returned to the presidency.

In the spring of 2025, Trump ordered a campaign of withering air strikes against the Houthis. The Iran-backed group sustained significant damage. Iranian advisers in Yemen reportedly beat a hasty retreat. And the volume of missiles coming out of Yemen dropped. However, it soon became clear that air power alone would not suffice. A broader strategy was needed, to include economic, diplomatic, and other soft power measures.

Ari Heistein, a talented Israeli-American analyst, has produced the following report in an effort to identify the elements needed for such a strategy. He deftly guides the reader through a history of this terrorist organization, an assessment of its current power structure, and the means available to degrade it. He affirms that a strong military response is essential because the Houthis have continually treated their adversaries' restraint as a sign of weakness. But he also identifies key targets of an economic pressure campaign that can weaken the Houthi regime. These include its banking system, diversion of humanitarian aid, and control of the vital port at Hodeidah. Diplomatically, it will be essential to exert constant pressure on Oman, which serves as a sanctuary for the Houthis as well as a conduit for illicit weapons.

Heistein presents a sound strategic framework that corrects the mistakes of past efforts to deal with the Houthis. The White House, Pentagon, and State Department should all take notice of what he has written. It should resonate in foreign capitals as well. In the end, the problems that plague Yemen and contributed to the rise of the Houthis are not likely to be solved quickly or easily. But Ansar Allah's hard power stems not from domestic factors. Rather, it derives from weapons, capabilities, and other material

support from the Islamic Republic of Iran. In other words, the Houthi problem is but one manifestation of the Iranian threat. Thus, any counter-Houthi policy must ultimately be part of a policy that erodes the Iranian regime's finances and capabilities.

The Houthi problem is part and parcel of the Iran problem. Both problems must be solved. This is the message delivered by the FDD delegations that continue to visit the Arabian Gulf. And it is the message that Ari Heistein conveys at the end of this impressive work.



Jonathan Schanzer
Executive Director, FDD
April 2025

Introduction

After overthrowing Yemen's internationally recognized government in 2014, the Houthis now rule over northern Yemen and its 20 million inhabitants. With the arms and training provided by Iran and Hezbollah, the group has since accumulated battlefield experience and stockpiles of weaponry that few nation-states possess. In addition, the Houthis' positioning along the southwestern edge of the Arabian Peninsula enables them to disrupt international maritime traffic transiting the Red Sea and threaten U.S. partners in the region. By misunderstanding and downplaying the Houthi threat, Washington contributed to its growth.

Initially a religious movement, the Houthis evolved into a political party, then a guerrilla force, and finally into a de facto regime. The first half of this monograph tracks the shifting response of the United States and its partners in the Gulf to the Houthi threat. It then turns to an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the Houthi regime as well as how the threat it poses might evolve. Finally, the monograph considers alternatives to current U.S. policy before laying out a comprehensive strategy to stop the regime's ongoing attacks and, over the longer term, erode the strategic pillars on which the regime rests.

Despite claims that the Houthis are immune to deterrence,¹ this monograph identifies pressure points that can influence Houthi behavior in the short term. Yet deterrence alone is not adequate to deal with the long-term threat posed by the organization. If merely deterred, the Houthis may exploit any lull in the fighting, as they did during the Saudi-Houthi ceasefire in 2022-23, to consolidate control within northern Yemen, expand their arsenal, and reinforce their protected bunkers and underground tunnels. They could also develop relations with additional foreign states or malign actors beyond the Iran-led "axis of resistance" to create supplementary sources of revenue or enhance their indigenous military production capabilities.

To deter the Houthis from further attacks on Red Sea shipping and other targets, the United States should focus on three sets of targets: Houthi stockpiles of strategic materials including cash and fuel; the regime's carefully cultivated image of invincibility among Yemenis; and the key security leaders responsible for enforcing Houthi control over Yemen.



A graphic shared by prominent Houthi media figures on social media calls on Yemenis to "be a partner in the victory" by donating funds, which are implied to support the Houthi missile force. Notably, the graphic highlights a wide range of financial institutions and corporations facilitating the campaign, including the Central Bank of Yemen-Sanaa, Yemen Post banking, the Yemen Wallet app, and mobile network operators. (@Alabnami_ABDO via X)

1. "The Houthis cannot be deterred": The Militia that defies the US and challenges the world," *Ynet* (Israel), December 23, 2024. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/sk8oo7wb1e>)

Over the longer term, the United States should target the major pillars that uphold the regime, forcing it to contend with instability or collapse if its destabilizing and rogue behavior persists. Those pillars are the regime's main sources of revenue, control of information, and comfortable strategic environment.

Washington and its allies can target four key sources of revenue:

- **Diversions of humanitarian aid:** Tens of billions of dollars of assistance have flowed into Yemen over the past decade of conflict. UN agencies and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) have done little to prevent the Houthis from controlling and diverting massive amounts of aid. Major donors, especially the United States, should demand greater transparency and hold accountable those who refuse to disclose and stop the diversion.
- **Control of Hodeidah port:** Washington and its partners should cease all UN funding for the restoration of Hodeidah port and seek to divert commercial traffic from that port so long as the Houthis fail to comply with their commitments under the 2018 Stockholm Agreement. The agreement mandated that a neutral third party administer the port, while its revenue would support public sector salaries.
- **Houthi-run financial institutions:** Major banks under Houthi control are used to finance terrorism and other destabilizing activities in Yemen and throughout the Middle East. They should be sanctioned by Washington and its partners and disconnected from the SWIFT global financial messaging system.
- **Maritime extortion:** A UN panel reported claims that shipping agencies are paying the Houthi regime for safe passage through the Red Sea, and this warrants investigation and enforcement efforts.

To counter the Houthis' propaganda and control of information, Washington should pursue two key lines of effort:

- **Promote alternatives to Houthi-controlled internet service providers.** Control of TeleYemen

and YemenNet provides the regime with hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue and enables it to limit and monitor how Yemenis use the internet.

- **Investigate and sanction human rights abusers and corrupt officials.** Washington should publicize Houthi atrocities and aggressively employ authorities, such as the Global Magnitsky sanctions program.

Finally, to isolate the Houthis diplomatically and strengthen its rivals within Yemen, Washington and its partners should:

- **Pressure third countries, such as Turkey and Oman, to stop providing sanctuary for Houthi operatives.** Oman allows the Houthis to operate a headquarters in the country. Businesses, banks and smuggling networks operate in Oman with impunity. Turkish entities serve as fronts for illicit procurement and money laundering.
- **Exact a price from the Houthis' patrons.** Continuously target advisers that Hezbollah and Iran send to Yemen to disconnect the Houthis from their key backers.
- **Promote Israeli-Arab normalization.** Working together, Israel and the Arab Gulf states can counter the Houthis more effectively.
- **Help unify anti-Houthi forces within Yemen.** Washington should not enmesh itself in internal Yemeni politics but should offer incentives for cooperative behavior.
- **Demonstrate power and unity of purpose.** Additional U.S.-led military exercises that incorporate regional partners can reinforce deterrence.
- **Create an intelligence-sharing consortium.** Sharing intelligence among coalition partners would facilitate defense against Houthi attacks employing advanced systems acquired from Iran, Russia, or China.

There is a focus today on military responses to the Houthi threat. These are essential, but over the long term, economic, informational, and political measures have a greater potential to undermine the Houthi regime.

The Emergence of the Houthi Threat

The March From Saada to Sanaa

The Houthi regime that controls the northern half of Yemen is an offshoot of a 1980s Shiite revivalist movement in the northern Yemeni governorate of Saada. Fragments of the movement transformed into a national political party in 1990,² which was hijacked and radicalized by Husayn al-Houthi in the mid-1990s and then evolved into a guerrilla force in 2004 before finally capturing Sanaa and the machinery of the Yemeni state in 2014. The movement bears the name of al-Houthi, who introduced its slogan, known as “the scream,” which calls for “Death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory to Islam.”³ The slogan encapsulates the movement’s ideology and is integral to its public events, symbols, and statements.

For six years, beginning in 2004, the Houthis fought a guerrilla war against the government of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, which they saw as aligned with U.S. interests. In September 2004,⁴ Yemeni government forces killed Husayn al-Houthi.⁵ The movement’s leadership passed temporarily to Husayn’s father, Badreddin al-Houthi, before Husayn’s brother, Abdelmalik al-Houthi, took control, which he retains today.

Saleh’s campaign failed to crush the Houthis. Instead, Sanaa’s hold on Yemen’s periphery grew weaker and the Houthis gained popular support as a result of the Saleh regime’s corruption and ham-fisted counterinsurgency efforts. Many senior Houthi leaders, including domestic intelligence chief Mutlaq “Abu Imad” al-Marrani and the former chief of external intelligence operations, Abdul Wahed Aburas,⁶ rose to prominence during this period.⁷

Saleh’s failure to crush the movement through military means from 2004-2010 is the origin of the myth that fighting against the Houthis only empowers them. However, this flawed narrative ignores the obvious failures of Yemen’s military to develop an effective counter-insurgency strategy. In reality, Saleh was more focused on playing the pro-government forces of Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and the Houthi insurgency against each other to weaken both and ensure the president’s continued rule.⁸

Amid the Arab Spring protests of 2011 that called for Saleh’s resignation, a bomb wounded the president, forcing him to seek medical treatment in Saudi Arabia. While he was there, the Gulf states successfully pressed him to resign and allow Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansour al-Hadi to take the reins. As part of the Gulf Cooperation Council’s initiative to promote an orderly transition of power in Yemen, Hadi oversaw the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in Yemen,

2. Mehdi Khalaji, “Yemen’s Zaidis: A Window for Iranian Influence,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2, 2015.

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-zaidis-window-iranian-influence>)

3. Burhan Ahmed, “Houthi Media: A Study in Ideological Warfare,” *Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies*, June 2, 2024. (<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/22797>)

4. “Ansar Allah,” *Australian National Security*, accessed March 25, 2025. (<https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/what-australia-is-doing/terrorist-organisations/listed-terrorist-organisations/ansar-allah>)

5. Fabian Hinz, “Yemen’s Houthis are going underground,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, April 29, 2024. (<https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/04/yemens-houthis-are-going-underground>)

6. During the government reshuffle in August 2024, Aburas was appointed to serve as vice minister of the Sana’a-based de facto Foreign Ministry.

7. “‘[Who Is ‘Al Marani,’ the Coup Leader’s Guard?],” *May 4 News* (Yemen), January 24, 2023. (<https://www.4may.net/news/86674>); “معلومات جديدة عن أبو راس: قائد ميداني للحوثيين بالجوف ونجا من غارة جوية استهدفتة في 0102 [New Information About Abu Ras: A Houthi Field Commander in Al-Jawf Who Survived an Airstrike Targeting Him in 2010],” *Al-Masdar* (Yemen), March 24, 2013. (<https://almasdaronline.com/article/43247>)

8. Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, “Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon,” *RAND Corporation*, April 14, 2010. (<https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG962.html>)

which sought to resolve the country's many internal disputes. Meanwhile, Saleh and his loyalists entered into an alliance of convenience with the Houthis, which enhanced the group's reach and military might considerably. The NDC then imploded⁹ when, in September 2014, the Houthi-Saleh alliance expanded its territorial control and marched into Sanaa.

While the NDC was still taking place, the Houthis' relationship with Iran and Hezbollah deepened.¹⁰ The Houthis belong to a minority branch of the Shiite faith known as Zaydism, yet their anti-Western and antisemitic doctrines led to deep admiration of Iran and Hezbollah.¹¹ In this period, the Houthis sent members to Beirut, where they received military and media training from Hezbollah and its Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) backers.¹² Many members of these cadres would go on to serve in senior roles in the Houthi regime.¹³ Previously, Iran had served mainly as a source

of inspiration, not material assistance, other than a few shipments of small arms and limited training.¹⁴

While many Yemen and foreign policy experts initially dismissed the Houthi slogan as harmless venting of frustration, the group's animus toward the United States manifested more clearly and concretely after it took the capital. The regime murdered a U.S. citizen whom it had unjustly detained,¹⁵ kidnapped numerous other Americans in Yemen,¹⁶ targeted a U.S. warship with missile attacks,¹⁷ and launched waves of arrests targeting those previously affiliated with U.S. institutions, including Yemenis who had worked at the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa.¹⁸ The Houthis also worked to indoctrinate the next generation of Yemenis with their radical anti-Western and antisemitic ideology, a campaign they named "the soft war."¹⁹ "The scream" featured prominently in these activities and was often accompanied by the Nazi one-armed salute.²⁰

9. Throughout the NDC there were strong indications that the Houthis planned to achieve their aims through violence. For examples, see: Fatima Abo Alasar, "Yemen's quandary in Dammaj," *Foreign Policy*, November 11, 2013. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/11/yemens-quandary-in-dammaj>)

10. Oved Lobel, "Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen," *European Eye on Radicalization*, March 2021. (<https://kyleorton.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ansar-allah-iran-report-oved-lobel.pdf>)

11. While both the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Houthis are Shia revolutionary movements, the former subscribes to the Twelver order, while the latter subscribe to the Zaydi ("Fiver") order. Historically, the Zaydis were considered the Shia order most similar to their Sunni coreligionists, but this gap has widened as the Houthis have adopted tenets of the revolutionary Shiism exported from Iran.

12. Trevor Johnston, Matthew Lane, Abigail Casey, Heather J. Williams, Ashley L. Rhoades, James Sladden, Nathan Vest, Jordan R. Reimer, and Ryan Haberman, "Could the Houthis Be the Next Hizballah?" *RAND Corporation*, July 13, 2020. (https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2551.html); Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Digital Footprint," *Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule*, October 25, 2023. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule-season-2>)

13. Ari Heistein, "The Houthi Regime is an Integrated Propaganda Machine," *The Cipher Brief*, March 13, 2024. (https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/the-houthi-regime-is-an-integrated-propaganda-machine)

14. Michael Knights, "The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, September 2018, pages 15-21. (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/CTC-SENTINEL-092018.pdf>); Nadwa Dawsari, "The Houthis and the limits of diplomacy in Yemen," *Middle East Institute*, May 6, 2021. (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/houthis-and-limits-diplomacy-yemen>)

15. *Hamen v. Islamic Republic Iran*, 401 F. Supp. 3d 85 (D.D.C. 2019). (<https://casetext.com/case/hamen-v-islamic-republic-iran-1>)

16. *Coombs v. Islamic Republic of Iran*, Civil Action 19-3363 (D.D.C. Mar. 10, 2022). (<https://casetext.com/case/coombs-v-islamic-republic-of-iran>)

17. Phil Stewart, "U.S. Navy ship targeted in failed missile attack from Yemen: U.S.," *Reuters*, October 10, 2016. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-usa-ship/u-s-navy-ship-targeted-in-failed-missile-attack-from-yemen-u-s-idUSKCN12A082>)

18. U.S. Department of State, Press Release, "The United States Condemns the Houthi Detention of Yemeni Staff of the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a and Breach of Embassy Compound," November 19, 2021. (<https://2021-2025.state.gov/the-united-states-condemns-the-houthi-detention-of-yemeni-staff-of-the-u-s-embassy-in-sanaa-and-breach-of-embassy-compound>)

19. Edmund Fitton-Brown and Ari Heistein, "The Houthis Fortify Their Regime by Targeting Yemen's Youngest," *Counter Extremism Project*, June 5, 2024. (<https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/houthis-fortify-their-regime-targeting-yemens-youngest>)

20. "Houthi supporters hold Nazi salute, chant anti-America, anti-Semitic slogans in video," *Al-Arabiya* (Saudi Arabia), April 25, 2021. (<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/04/25/Houthi-supporters-hold-Nazi-salute-chant-anti-America-anti-Semitic-slogans-in-video>)



Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis hold posters and portraits of Yemen's ex-president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, during a demonstration in support of the former president as his political party marks 35 years since its founding at Sabaeen Square in the capital Sanaa on August 24, 2017. (Photo by Mohammed Huwais/AFP via Getty Images)

Despite the Houthi regime's anti-American and anti-Israel vitriol, it prioritized the effort to defeat its adversaries inside Yemen. Still led by Hadi, Yemen's internationally recognized government (IRG) relocated to Aden and Riyadh after the Houthis captured Sanaa. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia established a coalition of Arab and African countries with Western backing to re-install the IRG in Sanaa. Riyadh hoped to accomplish that goal within weeks, seriously underestimating its opponent. Yet in the summer of 2015, the intervention of Emirati special forces on the outskirts of Aden reversed Houthi momentum, likely preventing them from taking control of the entire country.²¹

Washington's Uneven Support for the Anti-Houthi Coalition

President Barack Obama agreed to provide the Saudi-led coalition with intelligence and air-to-air refueling while facilitating weapons sales and diplomatic cover for the war. Washington also supported UN Security Council Resolution 2216, which imposed an arms embargo on the Houthis and demanded they withdraw from the territories they had conquered.²² In doing so, Washington hoped to reassure regional partners unsettled by the impending nuclear deal with Iran. However, former officials recount that the White House was disappointed by its limited ability to influence the Saudi-led campaign in ways that could have reduced the number of civilian casualties and alleviated the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen. As a result, in the summer of 2016, the Obama administration withdrew U.S. personnel assigned to a joint U.S.-Saudi planning cell.²³ Then, following an October 2016 airstrike by Saudi Arabia that hit a funeral hall and killed 140 people, the White House called for a review of the assistance provided to Saudi Arabia and shortly thereafter froze the sale of precision-guided munitions (PGMs) to the kingdom.²⁴

This interval of lukewarm support came to an end with Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017. His support for Riyadh was full-throated, and he quickly lifted the hold on the sale of PGMs to the kingdom. Also in 2017, the Saudi-led coalition began advancing northward along Yemen's Red Sea coast toward the port of Hodeidah, a critical lifeline for the Houthis, who began retaliating with ballistic missile strikes targeting critical infrastructure hundreds of

21. For additional information, see: Michael Knights, *25 Days To Aden: The Unknown Story of Arabian Elite Forces at War* (London: Profile Books, 2023). (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/25-days-aden-unknown-story-arabian-elite-forces-war>)

22. "Security Council Demands End to Yemen Violence, Adopting Resolution 2216 (2015), with Russian Federation Abstaining," *United Nations*, April 14, 2015. (<https://press.un.org/en/2015/sc11859.doc.htm>)

23. Christopher Blanchard and Jeremy Sharp, "Congress and the War in Yemen: Oversight and Legislation 2015-2021," *Congressional Research Service*, February 10, 2022. (<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45046>)

24. Helene Cooper, "U.S. Blocks Arms Sale to Saudi Arabia Amid Concerns Over Yemen War," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2016. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/us/politics/saudi-arabia-arms-sale-yemen-war.html>)

miles inside Saudi territory.²⁵ Following the Houthis' 2017 deployment of the Burkan-2H ballistic missile, which has a range exceeding 600 miles, forensic clues indicated that Iran was behind the advances in Houthi missile capabilities.²⁶ The Houthis also ordered the assassination of former President Saleh when they learned of his plans to break their alliance. After killing Saleh, the Houthis consolidated their power over the bureaucracy in Sanaa by purging it of Saleh loyalists.²⁷

Despite pressure from elements of Congress to reduce or end U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition,²⁸ the Trump administration held the line. By the summer of 2018, Washington was reportedly weighing direct support for the coalition's imminent operation to retake Hodeidah.²⁹ Around that time, top Yemen experts assessed that retaking the port city could lead to the regime's demise within a matter of months.³⁰ However, Riyadh's murder of Saudi columnist Jamal Khashoggi in October led to growing pressure at home and abroad that forced the administration to hold back. Washington ended air-to-air refueling support and began to push for a negotiated solution in Yemen. Adjustments in the Trump administration's position³¹ pressured the coalition to accept the UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement on the disposition of Hodeidah.

The pact froze the fighting around the port, put Hodeidah's management under a neutral third party,

required UN inspections of incoming cargo, mandated repairs to port infrastructure, and directed port revenue to the payment of public sector salaries. Implementation of the deal was one-sided. The coalition halted its advance, and the United Nations invested in the port's infrastructure, but the inspections group was dysfunctional, and the Houthis directed revenue to their war machine, not the public sector. While UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen Martin Griffiths played a key role in brokering the agreement,³² he failed to take a clear stance on the Houthis' continued violations of its terms.³³



Honor guards carry coffins of Houthi fighters who were killed in the ongoing fighting over the control-rich Marib city during a funeral procession on October 20, 2021, in Sanaa, Yemen. (Photo by Mohammed Hamoud/Getty Images)

25. Ian Williams and Shaan Shaikh, "The Missile War in Yemen," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 9, 2020. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/missile-war-yemen>)

26. Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Arsenal: Assessing the Islamic Republic of Iran's Ballistic Missile Program," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, February 2023. (<https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/fdd-monograph-arsenal-assessing-iran-ballistic-missile-program.pdf>)

27. "Houthis," *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, January 31, 2024. (<https://acleddata.com/yemen-conflict-observatory/actor-profiles/houthis>)

28. Scott Detrow, "Senate Votes To End U.S. Support For War In Yemen, Rebuking Trump And Saudi Arabia," *NPR*, December 12, 2018. (<https://www.npr.org/2018/12/12/676152310/senate-poised-to-vote-to-end-u-s-military-support-for-war-in-yemen>)

29. Dion Nissenbaum, "U.S. Weighs Expanding Military Role in Yemen War," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 3, 2018. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-weighs-expanding-military-role-in-yemen-war-1528064393>)

30. "Hodeidah's Importance to Victory in Yemen," *Beyond the Headlines*, May 30, 2018. (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/2Q7us9iajI3wI3DQq0LRak>)

31. Ryan Browne, "Mattis and Pompeo call for Yemen ceasefire 'within 30 days,'" *CNN*, October 31, 2018. (<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/30/politics/jim-mattis-yemen-ceasefire/index.html>)

32. "UN chief to attend intra-Yemeni talks in Sweden," *Xinhua* (China), December 12, 2018. (http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-12/12/c_137669404.htm)

33. "MPs demand Griffiths take a clear stance on Houthi circumvention of Stockholm Agreement," *Saudi Press Agency* (Saudi Arabia), January 8, 2019. (<https://www.spa.gov.sa/1872615>)

On other fronts, the fighting continued. The Houthis sought to capture Yemen's energy resources in Marib and Shabwa governorates. They also participated in an escalating Iran-led campaign against the external supporters of the IRG, foreshadowing their attacks in the Red Sea after the October 7 massacre.³⁴ This cooperation with Tehran comprised part of the clerical regime's asymmetric pushback against the Trump administration and its Middle East partners in response to their campaign of "maximum pressure" against Iran.³⁵

Over the span of several months in 2019, six commercial ships were attacked off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, including two Saudi vessels and one Emirati vessel, in sabotage operations attributed to the IRGC.³⁶ Iran also downed an RQ-4 Global Hawk, a \$130 million unmanned aerial system (UAS) deployed by the U.S. military for intelligence collection. The Trump administration approved a military response, but the president aborted the operation at the last moment. Meanwhile, Houthi drones supplied by Iran struck critical infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, including the Abha Airport, Shaybah oil field, and Shuqaiq desalination plant. In the summer of 2019, the Houthis used PGMs to assassinate a revered senior commander of the UAE-backed Security Belt Forces in southern Yemen, Brig. Gen. Munir "Abu Yamama" al-Mashali.³⁷ Then,

in September, a precision strike damaged Saudi oil infrastructure in Abqaiq and Khurais, taking 5 percent of global oil production offline for about three weeks.³⁸ The Houthis claimed credit for the attack, although the evidence points to Iran.³⁹ According to U.S. officials and nongovernmental experts, the one-way attack drones and cruise missiles that struck the Saudi oil installations in Abqaiq and Khurais were launched by Iranian forces who likely fired them from Iranian territory.⁴⁰



Drone wreckage, including one described as an Iranian Delta Wave UAV, from the attack on the Aramco Abqaiq oil refinery sits on display during a Ministry of Defense news conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on September 18, 2019. Saudi Arabia on Wednesday said the weekend attacks on the kingdom's critical oil infrastructure were "unquestionably sponsored by Iran." (Photo by Vivian Nereim/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

34. Ian Williams and Shaan Shaikh, "The Missile War in Yemen," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 9, 2020. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/missile-war-yemen>)

35. Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Making sense of Iranian escalation," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 20, 2019. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/05/making-sense-of-iranian-escalation.php>)

36. "Iran directly behind tanker attacks off UAE coast, US says," *Gulf News* (UAE), May 26, 2019. (<https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/iran-directly-behind-tanker-attacks-off-uae-coast-us-says-1.64179304>); Patrick Wintour and Julian Borger, "Two oil tankers attacked in Gulf of Oman," *The Guardian* (UK), June 13, 2019. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/13/oil-tankers-blasts-reports-gulf-of-oman-us-navy>)

37. Elana DeLozier, "Houthis Kill Top UAE-Backed Separatist Yemeni Commander," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 1, 2019. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthis-kill-top-uae-backed-separatist-yemeni-commander>)

38. Humeysra Pamuk, "Exclusive: US probe of Saudi oil attack shows it came from north – report," *Reuters*, December 19, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusive-us-probe-of-saudi-oil-attack-shows-it-came-from-north-report-idUSKBN1YN29E>)

39. Michelle Nichols, "Exclusive: U.N. investigators find Yemen's Houthis did not carry out Saudi oil attack," *Reuters*, January 9, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusive-un-investigators-find-yemens-houthis-did-not-carry-out-saudi-oil-a-idUSKBN1Z72VA>)

40. Erin Cunningham and Rick Noack, "Iran's strategic use of drones and missiles rattles Middle East rivals," *The Washington Post*, September 16, 2019. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/irans-strategic-use-of-drones-and-missiles-rattles-middle-east-rivals/2019/09/16/64bb8894-d886-11e9-a1a5-162b8a9c9ca2_story.html); Erin Cunningham, "Iran's gamble: Analysts say brazen attack aimed to pressure U.S. with little fear of reprisal," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2019. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/irans-gamble-analysts-say-brazen-attack-aimed-to-pressure-us-with-little-fear-of-reprisal/2019/09/19/9cd561fa-da20-11e9-a1a5-162b8a9c9ca2_story.html)

The Houthis' Deepening Ties to Iran and Unraveling of the Saudi-Led Coalition

The Houthis' military success and precise attacks on sensitive targets were the result of growing cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran. As early as 2017, the IRGC chief, Maj. Gen. Ali Jafari, acknowledged providing support for the Houthis.⁴¹ Evidence of such support is now overwhelming.⁴² Weaponry is apparently smuggled into Houthi territory by ship through Hodeidah, by dhow through smaller ports or over land via Oman. IRGC and Hezbollah advisers help the Houthis use ever more sophisticated, Iran-supplied weapons.⁴³

Tehran also provided the Houthis with diplomatic legitimacy. On August 18, 2019, the clerical regime recognized Houthi envoy Ebrahim al-Dailami as Yemen's ambassador to Iran.⁴⁴ The Islamic Republic then established a reciprocal relationship by dispatching

IRGC official Hassan Irlu to Sanaa as Iran's ambassador to Yemen.⁴⁵ Shortly thereafter, the Iran-backed regime in Damascus recognized Houthi envoy Abdullah Sabri as Yemen's ambassador to Syria, though then President Bashar al-Assad quietly rescinded his recognition in October 2023 as the Syrian government sought to restore its own ties across the region.⁴⁶

The Houthis also integrated more fully into Iran's "Axis of Resistance," its network of proxies across the region.⁴⁷ While humanitarian organizations were warning that Yemen was on the brink of catastrophe in 2019,⁴⁸ the Houthis launched a "fundraiser for Hezbollah" that collected hundreds of thousands of dollars from Yemenis and likely compensated Hezbollah for services or weapons rendered.⁴⁹ Similarly, the Houthis held public events and fundraisers in support of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and other more obscure

41. Ahmad Majidiyar, "I.R.G.C. Admits Aiding Houthis against Saudi-Led Coalition in Yemen," *Middle East Institute*, November 27, 2017. (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/irgc-admits-aiding-houthis-against-saudi-led-coalition-yemen>)

42. Timothy A. Lenderking, "Hearing on Yemen and Red Sea Security Issues," *Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism*, February 27, 2024. (https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/01e46a20-e6f6-4bad-f15a-0b48904ee027/022724_Lenderking_Testimony.pdf); DIA Public Affairs, "DIA Report Confirms the Houthis' Use of Iranian Missiles and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles to Conduct Attacks Across the Middle East," *Defense Intelligence Agency*, February 6, 2024. (<https://www.dia.mil/News-Features/Articles/Article-View/Article/3662325/dia-report-confirms-the-houthis-use-of-iranian-missiles-and-unmanned-aerial-veh>); "Iranian Technology Transfers to Yemen," *Conflict Armament Research*, March 2017. (<https://www.conflictarm.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Iranian-Technology-Transfers-to-Yemen.pdf>); Farzin Nadimi, "The UN Exposes Houthi Reliance on Iranian Weapons," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 13, 2020. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/un-exposes-houthi-reliance-iranian-weapons>)

43. Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks," *Middle East Institute*, July 2021. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4707>)

44. "UK's Yemen envoy denounces Houthi's 'ambassador to Iran,'" *Arab News* (Saudi Arabia), August 20, 2019. (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1542686/amp>)

45. "Yemen wants stronger ties with Tehran, 'Houthi' FM tells new Iran envoy," *Middle East Monitor* (UK), October 28, 2020. (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201028-yemen-wants-stronger-ties-with-tehran-houthi-fm-tells-new-iran-envoy>)

46. "Yemen's Houthi-led govt appoints new envoy to Syria," *Middle East Monitor* (UK), November 12, 2020. (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201112-yemens-houthi-led-govt-appoints-new-envoy-to-syria>); Saeed Al-Batati, "Syria expels Houthi 'diplomatic mission' in Damascus," *Arab News* (Saudi Arabia), October 12, 2023. (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2390246/middle-east>)

47. "Iran's Khamenei backs Yemen's Houthi movement, calls for dialogue," *Reuters*, August 13, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/irans-khamenei-backs-yemens-houthi-movement-calls-for-dialogue-idUSKCN1V31WC>)

48. Roald Høvring, "10 things to know about the crisis in Yemen," *Norwegian Refugee Council*, February 22, 2019. (<https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2019/why-yemen-is-the-worlds-worst-humanitarian-crisis>)

49. Albin Szakola, "Yemen's Houthis launch fundraising drive for cash-strapped Hezbollah," *The National* (UAE), May 27, 2019. (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/yemen-s-houthis-launch-fundraising-drive-for-cash-strapped-hezbollah-1.866660>); @YemeniFatima, X, May 29, 2019. (<https://x.com/YemeniFatima/status/1133827680988741632>)

Palestinian terror groups.⁵⁰ Tehran also exerts a strong ideological influence on the Houthis in Yemen. A 2020 report by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies described a phenomenon in Houthi-controlled areas in which "Iranian influences have increasingly been seen in the promotion of many cultural and religious activities that have no clear links to Zaidi history in Yemen."⁵¹

Under pressure from Iranian and Houthi attacks, by October 2019, the United Arab Emirates had announced it was withdrawing its forces from Yemen. Most withdrew, but Abu Dhabi retains a small footprint in southern Yemen and continues to support Emirati-aligned factions, particularly the southern separatist umbrella organization known as the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Around the same time, Riyadh sought an exit from the conflict, launching indirect peace talks with the Houthis mediated by Oman.⁵²

Shifts in the posturing of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi created shockwaves among the anti-Houthi forces within Yemen. Despite its recognition abroad, Saudi support, and financial resources, the IRG lacks the local support and military power of the STC. Meanwhile, the UAE-backed STC is allergic to the key role within the IRG played by northern Yemenis and Islamists from Yemen's Islah Party. Therefore, the STC saw the reduction of external involvement in Yemen as a window of

opportunity to push for political power commensurate with its relative popularity and military might. The friction between the STC and IRG, which were ostensibly aligned against the Houthis, erupted into firefights in the summer of 2019. While Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates brokered the November 2019 Riyadh Agreement to manage tensions between the STC and IRG, they persist beneath the surface.

Meanwhile, the Houthi campaign to conquer the rest of Yemen continued. Though they seized al-Hazam, the capital of the northwestern Yemeni province of Jawf, in March 2020, IRG forces stopped them short of Marib and Shabwa, the epicenter of Yemen's oil and gas industry. As the fighting continued and Trump's tenure drew to a close, the administration continued arms sales to the Arab Gulf states and even designated the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in its final days in office. Both actions drew much consternation from humanitarian organizations and opponents in the Democratic Party, who claimed these steps would worsen Yemen's already dire humanitarian situation.⁵³

Under Biden, Washington Changes Direction Again

By 2020, public opinion in the United States regarding Saudi Arabia was at an all-time low,⁵⁴ and this antipathy was especially widespread within the Democratic Party.⁵⁵ During his presidential campaign, Joe Biden

50. "The Houthis and U.S.-Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *Counter Extremism Project*, September 2023. (https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-09/The%20Houthis%20and%20U.S.-Designated%20Foreign%20Terrorist%20Organizations_Sept%202023.pdf)

51. Mohammed Almahfali and James Root, "How Iran's Islamic Revolution Does, and Does Not, Influence Houthi Rule in Northern Yemen," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, February 13, 2020. (<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9050>)

52. Ahmed al-Haj and Maggie Michael, "Saudi Arabia, Yemen's Houthi rebels in indirect peace talks," *Associated Press*, November 13, 2019. (<https://apnews.com/article/oman-yemen-international-news-iran-saudi-arabia-cb393079f7be48d2951b3ae3f2d4361b>)

53. Jennifer Hansler, "Biden administration to remove Houthis from terrorist list, reversing Trump's decision," *CNN*, February 5, 2021. (<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/05/politics/us-houthis-terrorist-list/index.html>); United Nations Security Council, Press Release, "United States' Designation of Houthi Militia as Foreign Terrorist Organization Risks Expediting Large-Scale Famine in Yemen, Speakers Warn Security Council," January 14, 2021. (<https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14410.doc.htm>); "Senate fails to overturn Saudi arms sale veto," *BBC* (UK), July 30, 2019. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49159850>)

54. "Country Ratings," *Gallup*, accessed October 1, 2024. (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1624/perceptions-foreign-countries.aspx>)

55. Matthew Yglesias, "The US-Saudi alliance is deeply unpopular with the American people," *Vox*, January 6, 2020. (<https://www.vox.com/2020/1/6/21050019/saudi-arabia-poll-unpopular>)

pledged to make Riyadh a “pariah.”⁵⁶ Accordingly, the linchpin of the Biden administration’s policy toward Yemen was its belief that the primary cause of the country’s crises was the Saudi-led military intervention. Just two weeks into his tenure, Biden declared, “this war has to end. And to underscore our commitment, we’re ending all American support for [the Saudi-led coalition’s] offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arm sales.”⁵⁷ In a return to Obama-era policy, the Biden administration once more put the sale of PGMs to Saudi Arabia on hold.⁵⁸ One week later, the White House removed the Houthis’ FTO designation.⁵⁹ While never stated explicitly, the White House policy was built on the idea that pressuring Riyadh and coaxing the Houthis could bring both sides to an agreement. Then, the hope was, that peace would allow for an alleviation of the humanitarian situation and ultimately greater prosperity for Yemen.

Yet the White House’s initial reading of the situation was disconnected from reality in three major ways. First, the Saudis had been signaling their desire to exit the conflict for years, and the Houthis were in no rush to grant them an easy departure, which would stop the hemorrhaging of resources by the Saudi-led coalition. Second, the kingdom’s withdrawal from Yemen would not end the conflict, as it would not resolve the domestic disputes fueling Yemen’s civil war. Third, it is inconceivable that, even under more

peaceful conditions, a functional economy capable of improving the humanitarian situation could emerge under the brutal and exploitative Houthi regime.

Still, some in Congress felt that the Biden administration’s shift in Yemen policy did not go far enough. In May 2021, 16 Democratic senators wrote a public appeal to Biden in which they lauded his initial moves as “welcome steps” but emphasized the need for the White House to “demand that Saudi Arabia allow the unfettered delivery of food, fuel, and other humanitarian aid through the Hodeidah port, under United Nations auspices.”⁶⁰ By this time, many Yemen experts had acknowledged that the Houthis had been creating artificial shortages to exacerbate concerns over a humanitarian crisis⁶¹ as well as to provide an opportunity for regime cronies to gouge Yemenis on the black market.⁶²

Despite Biden’s conciliatory moves, Houthi aggression escalated sharply. According to a report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), “The number of Houthi attacks against predominantly civilian targets in Saudi Arabia doubled over the first nine months of 2021 compared with the same period in 2020.”⁶³ Additionally, after a brief pause, the Houthis renewed their campaign to take Yemen’s oil-rich province of Marib.⁶⁴ Pressuring Riyadh did not deliver the results the White House expected.

56. “Read: Democratic debate transcript, November 20, 2019,” *NBC News*, November 21, 2019. (<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/read-democratic-debate-transcript-november-20-2019-n1088186>)

57. “Biden ends support for Saudi’s Yemen war in foreign policy shift,” *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), February 4, 2021. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/4/biden-to-announce-a-special-envoy-for-yemen>)

58. Joe Gould and Aaron Mehta, “Boeing, Raytheon missile sales to Saudi Arabia paused by Biden administration,” *Defense News*, February 5, 2021. (<https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2021/02/05/boeing-raytheon-missile-sales-to-saudi-arabia-canceled-by-biden-administration>)

59. Antony J. Blinken, “Revocation of the Terrorist Designations of Ansarallah,” *U.S. Department of State*, February 12, 2021. (archived version available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20210218095146/https://www.state.gov/revocation-of-the-terrorist-designations-of-ansarallah>)

60. “Letter to Biden regarding the Saudi blockade of Yemen,” May 19, 2021. ([https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2021.05.19%20Letter%20to%20Biden%20re%20Saudi%20blockade%20of%20Yemen%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2021.05.19%20Letter%20to%20Biden%20re%20Saudi%20blockade%20of%20Yemen%20(1).pdf))

61. @UNOCHA, X, September 11, 2019. (<https://x.com/UNOCHA/status/1171767703503298561>)

62. @Ndawsari, X, June 22, 2020. (<https://x.com/Ndawsari/status/1275160980671148034>); @BShtwtr, X, June 24, 2020. (<https://x.com/BShtwtr/status/1275777771122409478>); @maldhabyani, X, June 29, 2020. (<https://x.com/maldhabyani/status/1277684191757586433>)

63. Seth G. Jones, Jared Thompson, Danielle Ngo, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., and Brian McSorley, “The Iranian and Houthi War against Saudi Arabia,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, December 21, 2021. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-and-houthi-war-against-saudi-arabia>)

64. Gregory D. Johnsen, “The Best of Intentions: How the Biden Administration Tried and Failed to End the War in Yemen,” *Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies*, March 27, 2022. (<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/17228>)

In February 2021, Biden appointed experienced diplomat Timothy Lenderking as his special envoy to deliver the peace deal for Yemen that the White House envisioned. By May 2021, however, Lenderking acknowledged that American concessions had not produced a Houthi interest in peace. He explained:

We were disappointed, frankly, that on the last trip to Oman, the Houthis declined to meet with the UN special envoy. And it wasn't just that particular meeting that was problematic. It's a trend, where the Houthis, while showing constructive engagement on a number of occasions with different stakeholders, have then backtracked or, as we say in sports terminology, moved the goal posts [from] what has been agreed to. And there won't be a peace deal without strong Houthi support. And we have gone out of our way as the United States, first by un-designating the organization, second by putting some constraints on support for the offensive capability of the Saudi-led coalition. Strong signals that the United States wants to do things in Yemen in a different way. But there have to be willing partners on all sides to engage.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, Washington's strategy for Yemen continued to entail pressuring Riyadh and enticing Sanaa. By January 2022, following a deadly Houthi drone and missile attack on the United Arab Emirates, the Biden administration acknowledged that it was considering the redesignation of the Houthis as an FTO. Yemen expert Gregory Johnsen assessed, "After more than a year of renewed diplomatic efforts, pressure on Saudi Arabia, and a carrot to the Houthis, the US

is no closer to ending the war in Yemen than it was the day President Biden took office."⁶⁶

Meanwhile, the Saudis faced barrages of Houthi missiles and drones directed at targets inside the kingdom while they provided air cover to fend off the Houthi attacks on the IRG stronghold in Marib. Still, Riyadh continued to try to negotiate its exit from the conflict. In April 2022, the Houthis and Saudis reached a temporary ceasefire, but after six months, the agreement expired and the Houthis refused to renew it.⁶⁷ However, the fighting did not return to its pre-ceasefire intensity, and negotiations for a long-term agreement continued. The kingdom made numerous goodwill gestures, including allowing a Houthi delegation to visit Riyadh and sending a Saudi delegation to Sanaa, but the process bore little if any fruit as the Houthis stalled and escalated their demands.⁶⁸

Shortly after the Saudi-Houthi ceasefire took effect in April 2022, Hadi resigned as IRG president and was replaced by an eight-person body known as the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). The PLC was established by the IRG's Saudi and Emirati backers to serve as the senior decision-making body for the IRG,⁶⁹ and it incorporates senior representatives from a variety of organizations, including the STC, Islah, and the National Resistance Council (NRC), which constitute Yemen's anti-Houthi coalition. Rashad al-Alimi, who has close ties with Riyadh and served as an adviser to Hadi, was appointed to the role of president of Yemen, and in that capacity, he also serves as chairman of the PLC.⁷⁰ The ostensible intention behind the PLC's creation was to integrate Yemen's anti-Houthi factions

65. "Special Briefing via Telephone with Timothy Lenderking," *U.S. Department of State*, May 20, 2021. (<https://2021-2025.state.gov/special-briefing-via-telephone-with-timothy-lenderking-u-s-special-envoy-for-yemen>)

66. Gregory D. Johnsen, "The Best of Intentions: How the Biden Administration Tried and Failed to End the War in Yemen," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, March 27, 2022. (<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/17228>)

67. Saeed al-Batati, "Yemen's Houthis 'will not extend UN-brokered truce,'" *Arab News* (Saudi Arabia), July 17, 2022. (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2123966/middle-east>)

68. Abdulghani Al-Iryani, "The Frog in Boiling Water: Saudi Arabia's Negotiations with the Houthis," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, June 22, 2023. (<https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/may-2023/20394>)

69. Gregory D. Johnsen, "Old Wine in New Skins: The Yemen Presidential Council," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, April 7, 2022. (<https://agsiw.org/old-wine-in-new-skins-the-yemen-presidential-council>)

70. "Yemen's Troubled Presidential Leadership Council," *International Crisis Group*, May 4, 2023. (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemens-troubled-presidential-leadership-council>)

into one cohesive representative body in preparation for an expected Saudi-Houthi deal, but it has largely failed to bridge the divides or improve the coordination of anti-Houthi forces.⁷¹

After the ceasefire's expiration in October 2022, the Houthis sought to increase their leverage over the IRG. They began a precise military campaign of drone attacks on tankers and oil terminals to halt Yemen's energy exports and starve the IRG of revenues, making it almost entirely dependent on external financial support to survive.⁷² The Houthi blockade of Yemen's energy sector went largely unnoticed by international news media, but it continues until today, and the Houthis claim that they will not lift the blockade until the IRG reaches a profit-sharing agreement with them.

Throughout the relative quiet of 2022-23, the Biden administration maintained a minimal amount of pressure on the Houthis. The United States opted not

to redesignate the Houthis as an FTO, continuing with pinpoint sanctions measures⁷³ and occasional interdictions of Iranian arms shipments destined for Yemen.⁷⁴ The sanctions primarily targeted the Sa'id al-Jamal network, which is based in Iran and facilitates illicit Houthi financial activities abroad,⁷⁵ while the interdiction efforts exposed the continuation of Houthi efforts to smuggle advanced weaponry into the country. Some of the items seized at sea on their way to the Houthis during this period include surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), land-attack cruise missiles, components for medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), and large quantities of ingredients for rocket and missile fuel.⁷⁶ In parallel, the United States continued to pour hundreds of millions of dollars each year into dysfunctional foreign assistance programs in Yemen,⁷⁷ via the United Nations and its many affiliates, which were flagrantly exploited by the Houthis as both a source of revenue and a means to purchase domestic political support.⁷⁸

71. Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen, "The Presidential Council's Year of Failure," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, July 11, 2023. (<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/20500>)

72. Fatima Abo Alasar, "The Houthis' embargo on Yemen's oil exports," *Middle East Institute*, December 9, 2022. (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/houthis-embargo-yemens-oil-exports>)

73. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Sanctions Network Financing Houthi Aggression and Instability in Yemen," June 10, 2021. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0221>); U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Official Overseeing Group's Offensive Operations," May 20, 2021. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0191>); U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Officer Overseeing Group's Seizure of Opposition Property," November 18, 2021. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0495>); U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Targets Key Houthi Finance Network in Coordination with Regional Gulf Partners," February 23, 2022. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0603>)

74. @US5thFleet, X, May 8, 2021. (<https://x.com/US5thFleet/status/1391162794364579843>); NAVCENT Public Affairs, "U.S. Navy Seizes 1,400 Assault Rifles During Illicit Weapons Interdiction," *Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*, December 22, 2021. (<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/411792/us-navy-seizes-1400-assault-rifles-during-illicit-weapons-interdiction>); "U.S. & Britain Seized Iranian Missiles," *United States Institute of Peace*, July 8, 2022. (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/jul/08/us-britain-seized-iranian-missiles>); U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Public Affairs, "U.S. Naval Forces Intercept Explosive Material Bound for Yemen," *U.S. Navy*, November 15, 2022. (<https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3218299/us-naval-forces-intercept-explosive-material-bound-for-yemen>)

75. U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Key Houthi Finance Network in Coordination with Regional Gulf Partners," February 23, 2022. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0603>)

76. U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "Seized at Sea: Iranian Weapons Smuggled to the Houthis," July 14, 2024. (https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Seized_at_Sea.pdf)

77. U.S. Mission to Yemen, Press Release, "United States Announces Nearly \$220 million in Additional Humanitarian Assistance for the People of Yemen," May 7, 2024. (<https://ye.usembassy.gov/united-states-announces-nearly-220-million-in-additional-humanitarian-assistance-for-the-people-of-yemen>)

78. Ari Heistein and Nathaniel Rabkin, "Houthi Diversion of Humanitarian Assistance in Yemen," *Counter Extremism Project*, June 2024. (<https://www.counterextremism.com/content/houthi-diversion-humanitarian-assistance-yemen>); UN World Food Programme, "Yemen Annual Country Report: 2023," accessed March 26, 2025. (https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000157774/download/?_ga=2.5266611.1035179167.1738480874-1275863918.1736329411)

Ceasefire or not, the Houthis wasted no time in procuring more advanced weapons from Iran. This was made abundantly clear during a September 2023 parade at which the Houthis showcased their latest military hardware.⁷⁹ Fabian Hinz, a research fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), noted the advanced materiel presented in the 2023 parade, which indicated the Houthi regime had enhanced the range⁸⁰ and accuracy⁸¹ of its firepower. CENTCOM Commander Michael E. Kurilla also confirmed in his March 2024 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, “I’m certain that Iran exploited [the Saudi-Houthi ceasefire] and continued to provide funds and equipment to the Houthis.”⁸²

The quantum leap in the Houthi arsenal, as presented to the public by Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree in September 2023, should have set off alarm bells.⁸³ While there was a widespread tendency to dismiss the Houthis for presenting what were clearly Iranian-designed weapons as their own,⁸⁴ the types of arms they paraded foreshadowed the targets of their future campaigns. During the event, Saree announced weapons platforms as they passed by the crowd, providing

the names and technical specifications (range, size of warhead, and domain) for each weapon. The parade included numerous anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs) with ranges that reportedly extended to 500 miles, as well as MRBMs capable of traveling the 1,200 miles necessary to strike Israel from Yemen.⁸⁵ This positioned the Houthis as perhaps the most dangerous of Iran-backed forces in the region, and certainly the only such group in possession of MRBMs and ASBMs.⁸⁶

At the 2023 parade, the Houthis also presented the Saqr-2 anti-aircraft missile. Saree declared:

The new Saqr-2 missile is passing in front of the podium. It has a range of [93 miles] and can reach an altitude of 53,000 feet. It is equipped with a high-explosive warhead, as well as advanced technology to confront distortion and electronic warfare. It is used against all types of reconnaissance and electronic-warfare aircraft. It is used against all types of unarmed reconnaissance aircraft, as well as against cruise missiles. It entered service after several tests.⁸⁷

The group has since used its advanced anti-aircraft capabilities, presumed to be the Saqr-1 or Saqr-2, to shoot down over a dozen U.S. MQ-9 drones since

79. “Houthis Showcase Large Arsenal Of Missiles, Drones At Sana’a Military Parade,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, September 21, 2023. (<https://www.memri.org/tv/houthis-showcase-large-arsenal-missiles-drones-military-parade>)

80. @fab_hinz, X, September 21, 2023. (https://x.com/fab_hinz/status/1704819625727267199)

81. @fab_hinz, X, September 21, 2023. (https://x.com/fab_hinz/status/1704838068589478383)

82. Michael E. Kurilla and Michael E. Langley, “Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2025 and The Future Years,” *Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, March 7, 2024. (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/3700887/senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-posture-of-united-states-central-command>)

83. Ari Heistein, “How the Houthis Built Their Arsenal: Defense and Intelligence Procurement,” *Counter Extremism Project*, November 2023. (<https://www.counterextremism.com/content/how-houthis-built-their-arsenal-defense-and-intelligence-procurement>)

84. U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iran: Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East,” February 2024. (https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Iran_Houthi_Final2.pdf)

85. “Houthis Showcase Large Arsenal Of Missiles, Drones At Sana’a Military Parade,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, September 21, 2023. (<https://www.memri.org/tv/houthis-showcase-large-arsenal-missiles-drones-military-parade>); “Armed forces reveal new weapons systems in military parade,” *Saba News Agency* (Yemen), September 24, 2023. (<https://www.saba.ye/en/news3266848.htm>)

86. Agnes Helou, “Flexing its muscles, Iran steps away from deniability in arming the Houthis: Analysts,” *Breaking Defense*, June 5, 2024. (<https://breakingdefense.com/2024/06/flexing-its-muscles-iran-steps-away-from-deniability-in-arming-the-houthis-analysts>)

87. “Houthis Showcase Large Arsenal Of Missiles, Drones At Sana’a Military Parade,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, September 21, 2023. (<https://www.memri.org/tv/houthis-showcase-large-arsenal-missiles-drones-military-parade>)

October 2023.⁸⁸ Each MQ-9 carries a price tag between \$14 million and \$30 million.⁸⁹ The Houthis may have even used the Saqr, or some variation of it, to take the exceptionally provocative step of targeting an American F-16 in February 2025⁹⁰ despite the informal temporary ceasefire in place at that time.

The Assault on Israel and International Shipping

After Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, the Houthis initiated an aggressive campaign to target both Israeli territory and international shipping. On October 19, the group launched the first of many barrages of drones and missiles at Eilat.⁹¹ On November 14, Abdelmalik al-Houthi threatened to strike Israel-linked ships in the Red Sea.⁹² Several days later, the group hijacked the *Galaxy Leader*, a ship with partial Israeli ownership.⁹³ The ship and its 25-member crew — mostly Philippine nationals, with no Israelis among them — remained in Houthi custody for an extended period and served as a “tourist attraction”⁹⁴ for the Houthi regime.⁹⁵

The Houthis launched a second attempt to commandeer a commercial vessel in the Red Sea in late December



Members of the Galaxy Leader's crew sit on chairs while meeting a delegation of the International Red Cross on the ship in the Red Sea off Hodeidah, Yemen, on May 12, 2024. The vessel was taken over by the Houthis on November 19, 2023, including its multi-nationality 25 crew members. (Photo by Mohammed Hamoud/Getty Images)

2023 when they sent four small boats to approach the Singapore-registered Maersk Hangzhou and force its surrender. However, U.S. forces sunk three of the Houthi boats as the fourth fled.⁹⁶ Foiling that hijacking marked an initial success for “Operation Prosperity Guardian,” the U.S.-led coalition of around 20 countries launched days earlier to defend against Houthi disruption to international shipping in the Red Sea.

88. Joseph Haboush, “US says it lost contact with MQ-9 near Yemen after Houthis claim to have shot it down,” *Al-Arabiya* (Saudi Arabia), March 4, 2025. (<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/united-states/2025/03/05/us-says-it-lost-contact-with-mq-9-near-yemen-after-houthis-claim-to-have-shot-it-down>)

89. U.S. Air Force, “MQ-9 Reaper,” January 2025. (<https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/104470/mq-9-reaper>); Eleanor Watson, “3 U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drones, worth about \$30 million each, have crashed in or near Yemen since November,” *CBS News*, April 26, 2024. (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/3-u-s-mq-9-reaper-drones-30-million-crash-yemen>)

90. Jennifer Griffin, “Houthis target US fighter jet, drone with SAM missiles for first time,” *Fox News*, February 22, 2025. (<https://www.foxnews.com/world/houthis-target-us-fighter-jet-drone-sam-missiles-first-time>)

91. Yoni Ben Menachem, “The Houthis in Yemen Have Joined the Battle against Israel,” *Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs*, October 29, 2023. (<https://jcpa.org/the-houthis-in-yemen-have-joined-the-battle-against-israel>)

92. “Yemen’s Houthis threaten to attack Israeli ships in Red Sea,” *The New Arab* (UK), November 14, 2023. (<https://www.newarab.com/news/yemens-houthis-threaten-attack-israeli-ships-red-sea>)

93. Benoit Faucon, Costas Paris, and Gordon Lubold, “Houthi Rebel Attacks Rattle Global Shipping,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 12, 2023. (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/houthi-rebel-attacks-target-global-shipping-7e55d7ae>)

94. “Hijacked Car Carrier Becomes a Tourist Attraction for Houthi Influencers,” *The Maritime Executive*, November 28, 2023. (<https://maritime-executive.com/article/hijacked-car-carrier-becomes-tourist-attraction-for-houthi-influencers>); @Kholoud24583790, X, February 19, 2024. (<https://x.com/Kholoud24583790/status/1759699345417334874>)

95. After more than one year in Houthi captivity, the crew of the *Galaxy Leader* was eventually freed in January 2025 as part of an apparent agreement mediated by Oman. The crew’s release, following the implementation of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire days earlier, was intended to alleviate growing international pressure on the Houthis and their Omani enablers.

96. @CENTCOMArabic, X, December 31, 2023. (<https://x.com/CENTCOMArabic/status/1741499672642920838>)

After Houthi attacks against Israel and international shipping went on for nearly three months, it became clear that the U.S.-led coalition's defensive actions and Washington's behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts⁹⁷ had failed to rein in the threat. Iran was playing the role of spoiler, as its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (IRGC-QF) continued to provide supplies, targeting information, and military advice in support of the Houthi campaign.⁹⁸ Following a larger-than-usual Houthi attack with 21 munitions on U.S. forces and international shipping⁹⁹ on January 10, 2024, the UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning the Houthis,¹⁰⁰ and the United States and the United Kingdom initiated an air campaign, "Operation Poseidon Archer," targeting Houthi assets in Yemen.¹⁰¹

By running Prosperity Guardian and Poseidon Archer in parallel, Washington hoped that some coalition partners could undertake offensive actions as part of

Poseidon Archer without causing Prosperity Guardian's defensive coalition to disintegrate. The Defense Department news service reported that Poseidon Archer consisted of airstrikes against the Houthis' "command and control nodes, munitions depots, launching systems, production facilities and air defense radar systems used by the Houthis to carry out attacks against vessels operating in international waters."¹⁰² According to the Yemen Data Project, as of November 2024, Washington and London had launched over 290 airstrikes, the vast majority of which targeted Houthi military assets.¹⁰³ The Biden administration also sanctioned around two dozen entities linked to the Houthi military and its financing and procurement networks and listed the Houthi organization a specially designated global terrorist (SDGT) group.¹⁰⁴

But the Houthis were undeterred and continued to showcase advanced capabilities with the assistance and

97. Carlos Del Toro, *Testimony before the Senate Committee on Appropriations*, April 10, 2024. (https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/download_testimony23.pdf)

98. Christopher M. Blanchard, "Yemen: Conflict, Red Sea Attacks, and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, October 24, 2024. (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/IF12581.pdf>)

99. @CENTCOM, X, January 9, 2024. (<https://x.com/CENTCOM/status/1744898491917492690>)

100. United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2722, January 10, 2024. (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4033392?ln=en&v=pdf>)

101. Joe Biden, "Statement from President Joe Biden on Coalition Strikes in Houthi-Controlled Areas in Yemen," *The White House*, January 11, 2024. (<https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/01/11/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-coalition-strikes-in-houthi-controlled-areas-in-yemen>); According to U.S. Defense Department officials, Poseidon Archer is "not a named department operation, but it is something that CENTCOM has named in terms of multilateral strikes and dynamic strikes within Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen." See: Sabrina Singh, "Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh Holds a Press Briefing," *U.S. Department of Defense*, January 25, 2024. (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3657097/deputy-pentagon-press-secretary-sabrina-singh-holds-a-press-briefing>)

102. Joseph Clark, "U.S., Partners Launch Additional Strikes Against Houthi Military Targets," *DOD News*, January 23, 2024. (<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3652871/us-partners-launch-additional-strikes-against-houthi-military-targets>)

103. "Monthly Update on US-UK Strikes and Israeli Air Raids Summary, January 2025," *Yemen Data Project*, accessed February 3, 2025. (<https://us16.campaign-archive.com/?u=1912a1b11cab332fa977d3a6a&cid=614af9727a>)

104. On the differences between FTO and SDGT designations, see: Matthew Zweig, "Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) Designation and Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) Designation," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 21, 2022. (archived version available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20220503010552/https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/04/21/foreign-terrorist-organization-fto-designation-and-specially-designated-global-terrorist-sdgt-designation>); On the Biden administration's designations of entities related to Houthi military and defense procurement, see: U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Targets Network Financing Houthi Attacks on International Shipping," December 28, 2023. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2014>); U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "U.S. and UK Target Houthi Military Officials for Supporting Acts of Terrorism," January 25, 2024. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2048>); U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Targets Qods Force, Houthi, and Hizballah Finance and Trade Facilitators," March 26, 2024. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2209>); "The Houthis are again 'specially designated global terrorists.' Here's what that means," *The Atlantic Council*, January 17, 2024. (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-houthis-are-again-specially-designated-global-terrorists-heres-what-that-means>)

direction of Iran.¹⁰⁵ The Houthis fired over 600 missiles and UAS munitions at international shipping, resulting in damage to dozens of ships, the killing of four sailors, and the sinking of two vessels, the UK-owned *Rubymar* and the Greek-owned *Tutor*.¹⁰⁶

The Houthis caused major disruptions with attacks on international shipping traveling through the Bab al-Mandeb strait at the mouth of the Red Sea, which had served as a passage for over 15 percent of the world's shipping traffic.¹⁰⁷ By mid-2024, Red Sea maritime traffic dropped by two-thirds¹⁰⁸ or more¹⁰⁹ as major shipping companies rerouted via the Cape of Good Hope.¹¹⁰ This diversion reduced Egypt's Suez Canal revenue by 60 percent,¹¹¹ raised global insurance costs, and may be responsible for inflating prices and reducing GDP globally by around half a percentage point in 2024.¹¹²



The British-registered cargo ship 'Rubymar' sinking after it was targeted by Yemen's Houthi forces in international waters in the Red Sea, on March 3, 2024, in the Red Sea. (Photo by Al-Joumhouriah channel via Getty Images)

105. According to an article published in the Marine Corps University Press, in November 2023, the Houthis were the first to use ASBMs in combat: John T. Kuehn, "The U.S. Navy is at War: The United States' Quasi-Naval War with Yemen's Houthis," *Marine Corps University*, May 14, 2024. (<https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/Expeditions-with-MCUP-digital-journal/US-Navy-Is-at-War>); Emanuel Fabian and TOI Staff, "IDF intercepts ballistic missile that Houthis claim aimed at PM's plane at Ben Gurion," *The Times of Israel* (Israel), September 28, 2024. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-intercepts-houthi-ballistic-missile-fired-at-central-israel-for-3rd-time-this-month>); Carrier Strike Group Two Public Affairs, "U.S. Navy Rescues Crew from Vessel Struck by Houthis," *U.S. Navy*, June 17, 2024. (<https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3808975/us-navy-rescues-crew-from-vessel-struck-by-houthis>)

106. Ari Cicurel, "Monthly Iran Projectile Tracker: January 2025," *Jewish Institute for National Security of America*, February 7, 2025. (https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/monthly-iran-projectile-tracker-january-2025); "Yemen's Houthi leader says 156 attacks carried out against Israel," *Xinhua News* (China), May 3, 2024. (<https://english.news.cn/20240503/e8ab6f147adf4f2e9f6671d3bc374071/c.html>); "Houthis launch missile, drone attacks on US warships off Yemen's coast," *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), November 13, 2024. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/13/houthis-launch-missile-drone-attacks-on-us-warships-off-yemens-coast>)

107. Carlos Del Toro, "On Department of the Navy Posture," *Testimony before the Senate Committee on Appropriations*, April 10, 2024. (https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/download_testimony23.pdf); U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "Yemen: Houthi Attacks Placing Pressure on International Trade," June 13, 2024. (https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/YEM_Houthi-Attacks-Pressuring-International-Trade.pdf)

108. James Sillars, "Attacks on Red Sea shipping forces 66% decline in Suez Canal traffic – ONS," *Sky News* (UK), April 24, 2024. (<https://news.sky.com/story/attacks-on-red-sea-shipping-forces-66-decline-in-suez-canal-traffic-ons-13122044>)

109. Nuran Erkul Kaya, "Red Sea tensions: Maritime traffic in Suez at a crawl, more than doubles in Cape of Good Hope," *Anadolu Agency* (Turkey), May 27, 2024. (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/red-sea-tensions-maritime-traffic-in-suez-at-a-crawl-more-than-doubles-in-cape-of-good-hope/3231794>)

110. "CIMIC contribution to operations in the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Red Sea," *Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence*, accessed October 1, 2024. (<https://www.cimic-coe.org/resources/20240321-uc-lla-cimic-in-operation-prosperity-guardian-aspides-final-2.pdf>)

111. Mohamed Hendawy and Jana Choukeir, "Regional challenges cost Egypt around \$7bln of Suez Canal revenues in 2024, Sisi says," *Reuters*, December 26, 2024. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/regional-challenges-cost-egypt-around-7-bln-suez-canal-revenues-2024-sisi-says-2024-12-26>)

112. Andres B. Schwarzenberg, "Red Sea Shipping Disruptions: Estimating Economic Effects," *Congressional Research Service*, May 8, 2024. (<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12657>)

Attacks on Israel proved less effective. As of December 2024, over 200 Houthi projectiles targeted the Jewish state, though the vast majority were intercepted or missed their targets by a wide margin.¹¹³ A July 2024 strike on a Tel Aviv apartment caused one fatality and several injuries,¹¹⁴ prompting an IDF airstrike on Hodeidah port, destroying infrastructure and fuel stockpiles. After a brief lull following the Israeli strike, the Houthis resumed their attacks against Israel, which elicited additional IDF strikes targeting the Houthi port facilities of Hodeidah, Ras Issa, and Salif, as well as Houthi infrastructure in the capital city of Sanaa.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, Houthi missile and drone attacks against Israel persisted.

The Houthis temporarily paused their attacks on Israel and international shipping when the Israel-Hamas ceasefire went into effect in January 2025. Yet less than two months later, they declared that the resumption of such attacks after the Israel-Hamas ceasefire ended.¹¹⁶ These are tactical maneuvers. One should not attribute the Houthis' temporary restraint to a major reduction in the group's capabilities or a turn toward moderation.

Toward a Comprehensive Strategy for Containing the Houthis

The second half of this paper systematically presents an approach to dealing with the Houthis that goes beyond the defensive actions and limited strikes the United States and its allies have undertaken so far. First, it presents a clear diagnosis of the military threat the Houthis

currently pose while sketching its future trajectory. Next, it examines the main strengths and weaknesses of the Houthi regime to determine what vulnerabilities the United States and its partners may exploit. The paper then turns to the debate in Washington over how to improve U.S. policy. One school of thought favors an end to military action and a reliance exclusively on diplomacy. Yet as shown above, the Houthi response to a range of conciliatory measures has been to launch even greater provocations, including the current campaign against Israel and Red Sea commerce. When the Houthis cooperate with (or even initiate) de-escalatory measures, their ulterior motive has been to regroup and rearm for the next round. An opposing school favors more intensive military action. This is necessary but hardly sufficient. The final section below lays out a more comprehensive approach to eroding the Houthis' power base. It entails the targeting of multiple Houthi revenue streams as well as their control of the Yemeni internet and the information space more generally inside their domain. It also examines how the United States and its partners can impose costs on Houthi patrons while promoting unity among anti-Houthi forces in Yemen.

Defining the Problem: Immediate and Long-Term Threats

"So, what I would tell you, the Houthis, while they are a tribal force up in the northwest of Yemen, they are fighting with the most advanced weapons that Iran has, and they are being provided by Iran. So, we're basically fighting the Iranian weapons through the hands of the Houthis."

—Gen. Michael E. Kurilla, Commander, CENTCOM¹¹⁷

113. Emanuel Fabian and TOI Staff, "Ballistic missile fired from Yemen triggers sirens across central Israel," *The Times of Israel* (Israel), September 15, 2024. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/ballistic-missile-fired-from-yemen-triggers-sirens-across-central-israel>)

114. Agence France-Presse and TOI Staff, "Houthis' deadly Tel Aviv drone strike: 'Lucky shot' or strategic threat?" *The Times of Israel* (Israel), July 20, 2024. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/houthis-deadly-tel-aviv-drone-strike-lucky-shot-or-strategic-threat>)

115. Emanuel Fabian, "Dozens of Israeli planes strike port, power plants in Yemen after Houthi missile attacks," *The Times of Israel* (Israel), September 29, 2024. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-strikes-port-power-plants-in-yemen-after-recent-houthi-missile-attacks>)

116. "Houthis: 'We will continue to block Israeli ships until Gaza siege is lifted,'" *Ynet* (Israel), March 17, 2025. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/skafrvs3yl>)

117. Michael E. Kurilla and Michael E. Langley, "Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2025 and The Future Years," *Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, March 7, 2024. (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/3700887/senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-posture-of-united-states-central-command>)

The Houthi threat is grave and will metastasize if left untreated. Since October 7, 2023, the Houthis have launched a combined total of around 1,000 munitions at Israel, international shipping, and the international forces seeking to defend commercial vessels. Precedent suggests the Houthis will, in future rounds of fighting, continue to target the critical infrastructure of U.S. partners,¹¹⁸ U.S. forces in the region,¹¹⁹ and maritime shipping in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean.¹²⁰

U.S.-led efforts, including Prosperity Guardian and Poseidon Archer, hardly diminished Houthi capabilities. From September through December 2024, the monthly average of Houthi attacks on international shipping did drop below 30 percent of what it had been previously, and the attacks stopped when the Gaza ceasefire began on January 19, 2025.¹²¹ However, December 2024 and January 2025 (despite the ceasefire) were also the two months with the largest number of Houthi attacks on Israel to date.¹²² Even with the recent intensification of strikes on the Houthis by the new administration, the threat to international

maritime traffic in the Red Sea remains severe,¹²³ and the Houthis may have even turned the threat of attack into a source of revenue by extorting shipping companies for safe passage.¹²⁴ Despite the brief lull in Houthi attacks during the Gaza ceasefire, there is no evidence of a significant change in Houthi intentions or capabilities.

The Houthis' rapid technological progress was enabled by Iran and suggests they will acquire even more effective weapons. In 2023, the group, whose arsenal consisted primarily of small arms, heavy machine guns, and light artillery in 2010,¹²⁵ became the first entity in the world to employ an ASBM in an operational scenario. As documented by the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen,¹²⁶ this milestone reflects the unprecedented scale at which Iran has breached the UNSC arms embargo on the Houthis to deliver advanced weaponry. Considering the Houthis' close relationship with Iran, reports of their growing military-industrial capabilities,¹²⁷ and the evidently porous nature of the arms embargo,

118. "Houthi drone attack causes 'temporary reduction' in Saudi oil output," *Agence France-Presse* (France), March 20, 2022. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/houthi-drone-attack-causes-temporary-reduction-in-saudi-oil-output>); "Houthi forces claim drone attack on Saudi airbase," *Al-Monitor*, April 8, 2021. (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/houthi-forces-claim-drone-attack-saudi-airbase>); Ruth Michaelson, "Israel says it intercepted missile fired by Houthis at port city of Eilat," *The Guardian* (UK), July 21, 2024. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/21/israel-says-intercepted-missile-fired-houthis-port-city-eilat>); "Eight Wounded in Houthi Drone Strikes on Saudi Abha Airport," *Reuters*, August 31, 2021. (https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east_eight-wounded-houthi-drone-strikes-saudi-abha-airport/6210202.html)

119. "Houthi missiles target Saudi Arabia and UAE as escalation grows," *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), January 24, 2022. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/24/uae-says-intercepted-and-destroyed-houthi-missiles>)

120. Harry Papachristou, "Houthis claim new Indian Ocean attack amid repeat targeting of MSC ships," *TradeWinds*, May 9, 2024. (<https://www.tradewindsnews.com/containers/houthis-claim-new-indian-ocean-attack-amid-repeat-targeting-of-msc-ships/2-1-1641440>)

121. Ari Cicurel, "Monthly Iran Projectile Tracker: January 2025," *Jewish Institute for National Security of America*, February 7, 2025. (https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/monthly-iran-projectile-tracker-january-2025)

122. Ibid.

123. Bridget Diakun, "Suez Canal struggles with transits while Bab el Mandeb makes minor monthly gains," *Lloyd's List*, November 7, 2024. (<https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1151285/Suez-Canal-struggles-with-transits-while-Bab-el-Mandeb-makes-minor-monthly-gains>)

124. United Nations Security Council, "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014)," October 11, 2024. (<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/259/53/pdf/n2425953.pdf>)

125. Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, "Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen," *RAND Corporation*, April 14, 2010, page 200. (<https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG962.html>)

126. United Nations Security Council, "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014)," October 11, 2024. (<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/259/53/pdf/n2425953.pdf>)

127. The International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Turmoil in the Red Sea: Assessing the Houthis' strategic agenda," *YouTube*, May 1, 2024. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itdg11Qlf4Y&t=4048s>)

there is ample reason for concern about Houthis force-building efforts in a variety of new domains.¹²⁸

There are three key domains to consider. First, the localization of production facilities could reduce the effectiveness of efforts to interdict weapons and dual-use technology en route to the Houthis. Increased local manufacturing of UAS and missile components may enable mass production, enabling the Houthis to overwhelm enemy defenses with UAS “swarms.” Second, the potential acquisition of advanced autonomous aerial or maritime systems could further enhance their strike capabilities at scale or over longer distances. Houthi procurement of advanced air defense systems and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) may challenge the aerial and maritime dominance of the United States and its partners in the region. Third, potential Russian technical assistance, beyond ongoing intelligence sharing,¹²⁹ could enhance the Houthis’ military capabilities and independence from the Iranian-led axis.

The group’s high tolerance for risk, opaque decision-making processes, and strategic position near key U.S. partners and global transport routes make a potential quantum leap in their capabilities a development with both dangerous and unpredictable consequences. For instance, the Houthis could carry out coordinated attacks on U.S. military bases and allied critical

infrastructure by deploying swarms of hundreds of unmanned systems, overwhelming existing missile defense platforms and causing massive damage. Additionally, they might target commercial and military air traffic within a 300-mile radius of the territory they control¹³⁰ or damage global infrastructure, such as underwater internet cables.¹³¹ Finally, there is a strong possibility that the Houthis could expand the radius of their attacks on maritime traffic, further disrupting international trade by targeting alternative shipping routes.¹³²

These dangers do not appear imminent and seem unlikely to materialize in the coming months. But despite any temporary reductions in the intensity of the Houthi campaign against Israel and international shipping, the group will remain extremely hostile to the United States and its regional security partners.¹³³ Days after the Israel-Hamas ceasefire began in January 2025, Abdelmalek al-Houthi asserted, “Americans and Israelis are two sides of the same coin, with a level of criminality that the whole world witnessed in Gaza ... There is a divine promise to eliminate the criminal Israeli entity and this will not be delayed or changed, though the enemy is trying to isolate the Palestinian people.”¹³⁴

If the Houthis amass survivable firepower akin to Hezbollah¹³⁵ or North Korea, they could employ a similar

128. The Houthis are not only building advanced unmanned aerial vehicles but appear to be acquiring components for unmanned surface vehicles and possibly even underwater maritime vehicles: @CENTCOM, X, February 15, 2024. (<https://x.com/CENTCOM/status/1758084937331454351>)

129. Amos Yadlin, “Israel’s long arm was sent to Yemen— eyes on Iran and Lebanon,” *Channel 12* (Israel), July 21, 2024. (https://www.mako.co.il/news-columns/2024_q3/Article-856c1bf4695d091026.htm); Benoit Faucon, Michael R. Gordon, Warren P. Strobel, and Alan Cullison, “Putin’s ‘Merchant of Death’ Is Back in the Arms Business. This Time Selling to the Houthis,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2024. (<https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/putins-merchant-of-death-is-back-in-the-arms-business-this-time-selling-to-the-houthis-10b7f521>)

130. “Russia to Receive, Deploy S-500 Air Defense System Beginning This Year,” *Defense Security Asia* (Malaysia), May 26, 2024. (<https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/video-russia-to-receive-and-deploy-s-500-air-defense-system-beginning-this-year>)

131. Jordan Robertson and Drake Bennett, “A Subsea Cable Went Missing. Was Russia to Blame?” *Bloomberg*, July 11, 2024. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2024-undersea-cable-sabotage-russia-norway>)

132. Ramsey Al-Rikabi, “Houthis Are Using Weapons That Can Reach the Mediterranean Sea, US Says,” *Bloomberg*, May 22, 2024. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-22/houthis-have-weapons-that-can-reach-mediterranean-us>)

133. Ari Heistein and Nathaniel Rabkin, “In Gaza Ceasefire Talks, A Lesson From Yemen,” *The Cipher Brief*, March 28, 2024. (https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/the-sirens-song-of-a-ceasefire)

134. “قائد الثورة: الشعب اليمني سيتحضر لأي جولة قادمة لإسناد فلسطين بمستوى أداء وفعل أكثر تأثيراً” [Leader of the Revolution: The Yemeni People Will Prepare for Any Upcoming Round to Support Palestine With a More Influential Level of Performance and Action], *Yemen National Information Center*, January 16, 2025. (<http://yemen-nic.info/news/detail.php?ID=78665>)

135. Technically, the Houthis may have surpassed Hezbollah in terms of quality, especially with respect to their medium-range ballistic missile arsenal, though it is not clear which force has larger quantities of rockets, missiles, drones, and artillery.

strategy of threatening war, then extracting concessions in exchange for a reduction of tensions. While Yemen's geographic distance from key Gulf population centers limits parallels to Hezbollah and North Korea, Saudi cities like Najran, Jizan, and Abha remain vulnerable to continuous attacks by Houthi artillery, rockets, and drones. The group could conceivably render these areas of Saudi Arabia unlivable, as Hezbollah did northern Israel for 14 months in 2023-2024.¹³⁶ Additionally, the Houthis may adopt North Korea's rogue state model of selling goods and services to the highest bidder.¹³⁷

Houthi Regime Strengths and Weaknesses

The Houthi regime's top echelon from Saada is unified. It has a paramount leader who can depend on a cadre of senior leaders composed of his family members and other longtime loyalists. Aggressive security services work to preempt or stamp out dissent. Control of key revenue streams provides the regime with sufficient resources to pursue its goals while offering material rewards to its base. Nevertheless, resentment of Houthi elites remains widespread, and Yemen remains desperately poor. If a sustained disruption of Houthi-controlled revenue streams deprived the regime of its ability to reward supporters, the equilibrium struck by the regime over the past decade may begin to fall apart.

Strengths

Houthi decision-making is opaque, but it is clear that Abdelmalik al-Houthi's inner circle of family

members and longtime loyalists retain influential roles. This group includes Ahmed Hamid and Abdullah "Abu Ali" al-Hakim, who oversee humanitarian coordination and military intelligence, respectively; the Humran family, which manages the group's internal Preventative Security and the Palestine portfolio; the Marrani brothers, who serve in key security roles; and other Houthi relatives heading ministries like Interior¹³⁸ and Education.¹³⁹ While prioritizing loyalty over expertise may lower appointee quality, it ensures commitment to the regime and minimizes the risk of internal conflicts or betrayal, helping the Houthis maintain unity under significant pressure.

The Houthi regime's leadership also relies on its Security and Intelligence Services (SIS), formed in 2019 under the Ministry of Interior. The SIS suppresses dissent, controls media, indoctrinates the public, oversees international humanitarian aid distribution, and allocates scarce resources to loyalists. For example, the SIS director in Taiz governorate, Sami Abu Talib, is involved in organizing Houthi-oriented events for the public, forcing SIS prisoners to put on plays for residents that promote Houthi narratives, and determining how essentials like gas¹⁴⁰ for heating and cooking should be distributed among the population in Taiz.¹⁴¹ Abu Talib's tactics constitute just a single example of a phenomenon entrenched throughout Yemen to ensure the regime's control. In the parts of Yemen under Houthi control, highly intrusive state

¹³⁶. Nick Schiffrin, Karl Bostic, Teresa Cebrián Aranda, Mekhi Hill, and Ethan Dodd, "Hezbollah rocket barrage into Israel raises fears about war in the north," *PBS News*, June 12, 2024. (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/hezbollah-rocket-barrage-into-israel-raises-fears-about-war-in-the-north>)

¹³⁷. Charles Clover, Andrew England, and Christopher Miller, "Russia recruits Yemeni mercenaries to fight in Ukraine," *Financial Times* (UK), November 24, 2024. (<https://www.ft.com/content/da966006-88e5-4c25-9075-7c07c4702e06>)

¹³⁸. Abdelkarim al-Houthi, Minister of Interior (2018-present). See: Joe Truzman, "The Houthis' leadership structure," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, October 6, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/10/06/the-houthis-leadership-structure>)

¹³⁹. Yahya al-Houthi led the Ministry of Education from 2016 until his dismissal in August 2024 when the government was reshuffled. See: Joe Truzman, "The Houthis' leadership structure," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, October 6, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/10/06/the-houthis-leadership-structure>)

¹⁴⁰. In a 2021 Facebook post, human rights lawyer Abdulmajeed Sabra explained that Houthi control of vital supplies like gas cylinders has enabled the regime to compel Yemenis to do whatever they ask, from attending events to serving on the front lines: Abdulmajeed Sabra, *Facebook*, September 12, 2021. (<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/12DJzsbLJue>)

¹⁴¹. Ari Heistein, "Eyes of the Regime: How the Houthi Security and Intelligence Service Ensures Political Domination in Yemen," *Counter Extremism Project*, December 13, 2024. (https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2024-12/Eyes%20of%20the%20Regime_Houthi%20SIS_v2.pdf)

organs have minimized the likelihood of any grassroots movement threatening the regime's stability.

As for external threats, after surviving the offensive by the Saudi-led coalition in 2018, the Houthi regime enjoys a comfortable strategic environment. There is not a single actor in the Middle East or beyond working to undermine the regime's stability or achieve much beyond stopping Houthi attacks. In practice, this means that the Houthis are able to initiate confrontations and calibrate their level of intensity in accordance with their own interests.

Weaknesses

The weakness of the Houthis' domestic opposition does not indicate public satisfaction with their rule. In fact, before Hamas's "Al-Aqsa Flood" attacks, Yemen saw unprecedented protests against Houthi misrule.¹⁴²

The regime's narrow leadership class, based on shared backgrounds and bloodlines, excludes much of the population from power. This class, many of whose members have roots in the Houthi heartland of the Saada governorate, holds both political and economic power. But the dominance of this new elite has led to increasing resentment. The Sanaa Center assessed, "[Houthi] authorities have been alarmed by a gradual rise in public complaints about the economy while Houthi revenues are rising and many among the Houthi elite have clearly enriched themselves."¹⁴³

Despite the wealth of insiders, Yemen's economy remains dire. The annual GDP has fallen below \$17

billion,¹⁴⁴ with per capita income under \$500,¹⁴⁵ down from nearly \$1,500 a decade ago. This puts Yemen in the company of the poorest countries on Earth. Public sector jobs, which once provided crucial income for a mass of government workers, now offer only partial salaries. The regime's predatory economic model stifles potential profit-making industries, with the Houthis extorting businesses like mobile network operators to ensure that the regime is the primary beneficiary of any economic success. This barely sustainable rent-seeking approach generates public resentment and forces the regime to continually seek new revenue sources from an already weak economy, further deepening Yemen's economic decline.

With regard to military capabilities, the Houthis have made impressive strides over the past 15 years but appear overly reliant on Tehran's Axis of Resistance, which itself is facing an unprecedented crisis. Iran endured the destruction of its air defenses by Israel in October 2024, and Trump's return to office portends a return to intense U.S. sanctions pressure, restricting the resources available for supporting the axis. Hezbollah has been severely weakened by the decimation of its mid-level and senior leadership as well as clear indications that the group has been penetrated by foreign intelligence. In December 2024, the Assad regime collapsed following a 13-day rebel offensive. The Houthis are attempting to diversify their partnerships beyond the Axis of Resistance, including approaches to Russia,¹⁴⁶ al-Shabab,¹⁴⁷ and others, but these efforts have yet to yield significant results.

142. Saeed al-Batati, "Houthis furious as former President Saleh's allies support public salary demands," *Arab News* (Saudi Arabia), September 3, 2023. (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2366681/middle-east>)

143. "Houthis Visit Riyadh as Bilateral Talks Move Forward," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, November 20, 2023. (<https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/sept-oct-2023/21236>)

144. "GDP, current prices," *International Monetary Fund*, accessed January 7, 2025. (<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/YEM?zoom=YEM&highlight=YEM>)

145. "GDP per capita, current prices," *International Monetary Fund*, accessed January 7, 2025. (<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/YEM?zoom=YEM&highlight=YEM>)

146. Ari Heistein and Daniel Rakov, "Russian Roulette on the Red Sea," *War on the Rocks*, October 24, 2024. (<https://warontherocks.com/2024/10/russian-roulette-on-the-red-sea/>)

147. Nadwa Dawsari, "Armed Groups in Context: The Houthis – From Local Insurgency to Regional (Non-State) Powerhouse Shaping Middle East Dynamics," *Armed Groups and International Law*, January 14, 2025. (<https://www.armedgroups-internationalaw.org/2025/01/14/the-houthis-from-local-insurgency-to-regional-non-state-powerhouse-shaping-middle-east-dynamics>)

Critiques of the Biden Administration's Houthi Strategy

In February 2024, former CIA director and U.S. Army Gen. David Petraeus forecasted that the U.S. Navy would “over time, sufficiently degrade, and disrupt, and eventually defeat what it is the Houthis are able to do,”¹⁴⁸ a goal that now appears remote. Even President Trump’s intensification of these efforts as part of “Operation Rough Rider” have failed to eliminate threats to Red Sea maritime traffic, let alone chart a way forward for coping with the long-term Houthi challenge. At the same time, U.S. political leaders have not put forward compelling ideas for how to address the threat more effectively. The progressive left, with support from a number of isolationist-leaning conservatives, opposes military operations against the Houthis. More hawkish conservatives favor a more forceful response, pointing to timidity as the reason for the failure of current policy. While there is a need for more decisive action on the military front, a comprehensive strategy must incorporate economic and diplomatic components, which the next section of this paper presents in detail.

Among opponents of military action, critics often used legal arguments, insisting that military action was unconstitutional in the absence of congressional approval. Prominent voices on this side of the debate include the progressive House members known as “The Squad.” Former Rep. Cori Bush (D-MO) posted on X,

“people do not want more of our taxpayer dollars going to endless war and the killing of civilians”¹⁴⁹ while Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) added, “the American people are tired of endless war.”¹⁵⁰ Several of the more isolationist Republicans in Congress, including Reps. Thomas Massie (R-KY), Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), and Nancy Mace (R-NC), echoed the sentiments of their progressive colleagues. Framing the disagreement as a legal matter rather than a policy dispute helped bring together critics from left and right. But as in previous disputes over presidential war powers, such legal arguments did not prove capable of mobilizing significant opposition to the president.

What should be done if the use of force is off the table? Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA) argued that the “best path forward” to stopping Houthi aggression would be an Israel-Hamas ceasefire,¹⁵¹ even though senior Houthi leaders have said such developments would result in a minor reduction in operational tempo rather than a renunciation of jihadist plans and ambitions.¹⁵² While the January 2025 Israel-Hamas ceasefire was accompanied by a partial¹⁵³ reduction in Houthi attacks against Israeli and Red Sea vessels,¹⁵⁴ Houthi leaders quickly found a pretext to resume attacks.¹⁵⁵

A different response was that nothing needs to be done because the issue is of little importance to the United States. In February 2024, a top aide to Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO), an outspoken critic of foreign

148. “American Military Leadership in the Middle East,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 28, 2024. (<https://www.cfr.org/event/american-military-leadership-middle-east>)

149. @RepCori, X, January 12, 2024. (<https://x.com/RepCori/status/1745614952855949622>)

150. @RepRashida, X, January 12, 2024. (<https://x.com/RepRashida/status/1745616407880990784>)

151. Gabby Deutch, Marc Rod, and Emily Jacobs, “Bipartisan lineup of lawmakers demand Houthis get listed as a foreign terrorist organization,” *Jewish Insider*, July 19, 2024. (<https://jewishinsider.com/2024/07/bipartisan-lineup-of-lawmakers-demand-houthis-get-redesignated-as-a-terrorist-group>)

152. “Houthi Ansar Allah Movement Information Minister: Houthis To Continue Operations Even If Gaza Ceasefire Achieved; Jihad Against Jews And Christians Is ‘Religious Obligation;’ Houthis Will Soon Operate in Mediterranean Sea,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, May 8, 2024. (<https://www.memri.org/jttm/houthi-ansar-allah-movement-information-minister-houthis-continue-operations-even-if-gaza>)

153. Jennifer Griffin, “Houthis target US fighter jet, drone with SAM missiles for first time,” *Fox News*, February 22, 2025. (<https://www.foxnews.com/world/houthis-target-us-fighter-jet-drone-sam-missiles-first-time>)

154. “Monthly Update on US-UK Strikes and Israeli Air Raids Summary, January 2025,” *Yemen Data Project*, accessed February 3, 2025. (<https://us16.campaign-archive.com/?u=1912a1b11cab332fa977d3a6a&cid=614af9727a>)

155. “Houthis: ‘We will continue to block Israeli ships until Gaza siege is lifted,’” *Ynet* (Israel), March 17, 2025. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/skafvrs3yl>)

interventions, recommended that Washington “discontinue putting our fleet in harm’s way for a tertiary interest.”¹⁵⁶ However, the prevailing belief remained that Washington should support threatened security partners and treat the disruption of a major maritime trade route as a serious matter.¹⁵⁷

Calls for more decisive action also tended to be bipartisan. Several Democratic lawmakers, including Sen. Jacky Rosen (D-NV) and Reps. Ritchie Torres (D-NY) and Jared Moskowitz (D-FL),¹⁵⁸ have joined Republicans in urging Biden to redesignate the Houthis as an FTO.¹⁵⁹ Notably, when President Trump’s redesignation of the group came into effect in March 2025, the Democrats’ response the second time around was far more muted.¹⁶⁰ Republicans have been the most vocal in advocating for intensified military action, including more targeted strikes on Houthi and IRGC-QF assets. They viewed the January 2024 U.S.-UK airstrikes as “long overdue”¹⁶¹

but ultimately insufficient. Then Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) criticized the president for targeting empty warehouses¹⁶² instead of Houthi leaders.¹⁶³ Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-AK) urged threatening Iranian spy ships, like the Behshad,¹⁶⁴ which supported Houthi attacks in the Red Sea before returning to Iran in April 2024. Sen. Pete Ricketts (R-NE) suggested the United States respond to each Houthi attack with twice the force.¹⁶⁵ This more aggressive line of thinking incorporates the lesson of the past decade that the Houthis respond to efforts at accommodation or de-escalation with greater aggression at a time and place of their choosing.

Experts outside of the government offered specific advice on how to hit the Houthis harder. Retired U.S. Army Gen. Jack Keane advocated the sustained targeting of Houthi smuggling networks and Yemeni facilities for storing and constructing Iranian-designed weapons.¹⁶⁶ This strategy aims to deplete the Houthi arsenal, prevent restocking, and deter future procurement

156. @austinjdhahmer, X, February 1, 2024. (<https://x.com/austinjdhahmer/status/1752876051456266653>)

157. Daniel Bush, “After four years of ‘America First,’ what will U.S. foreign policy look like under Biden?” *PBS News*, December 17, 2020. (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/after-four-years-of-america-first-what-will-u-s-foreign-policy-look-like-under-biden>)

158. Gabby Deutch, Marc Rod, and Emily Jacobs, “Bipartisan lineup of lawmakers demand Houthis get listed as a foreign terrorist organization,” *Jewish Insider*, July 19, 2024. (<https://jewishinsider.com/2024/07/bipartisan-lineup-of-lawmakers-demand-houthis-get-redesignated-as-a-terrorist-group>)

159. “Cassidy, Daines, Republican Colleagues Introduces Bill to Redesignate Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization,” *Bill Cassidy: U.S. Senator for Louisiana*, November 3, 2023. (<https://www.cassidy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/cassidy-daines-republican-colleagues-introduces-bill-to-redesignate-houthis-as-a-foreign-terrorist-organization>); @SenTomCotton, X, July 23, 2024. (<https://x.com/SenTomCotton/status/1815810031918391499>)

160. Marc Rod and Emily Jacobs, “How Senate Dems view the redesignation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization,” *Jewish Insider*, March 7, 2025. (<https://jewishinsider.com/2025/03/senate-democrats-houthis-foreign-terrorist-organization-designation>)

161. Office of Senator Tom Cotton, Press Release, “Cotton: Strikes Against Houthi Rebels Long Overdue,” January 11, 2024. (<https://www.cotton.senate.gov/news/press-releases/cotton-strikes-against-houthi-rebels-long-overdue>)

162. Given the challenge of finding reliable information about the targets struck in Yemen, it is not clear whether the claims that the United States targeted “empty warehouses” is accurate. However, it does appear that under Biden, the United States was generally reticent to hit high-value targets that went beyond the neutralization of imminent threats. According to a December 2024 article from Israel’s Ynet, nearly one year into the campaign, U.S. strikes in Sanaa targeted “empty command posts near Sanaa and caused only minimal damage without leaving any real effect on the Houthi’s military capabilities.” See: Ron Ben-Yishai, “Only significant Israeli-American action would end Houthi threat,” *Ynet* (Israel), December 19, 2024. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/r1lg6dzsy1>)

163. Office of Senator Marco Rubio, Press Release, “ICYMI: Rubio: Biden Houthi Policy Hurts Americans,” June 27, 2024. (<https://www.rubio.senate.gov/icymi-rubio-biden-houthi-policy-hurts-americans>)

164. Office of Senator Dan Sullivan, Press Release, “Sullivan Tells Biden: Threaten to Sink Iranian Spy Ships,” March 15, 2024. (<https://www.sullivan.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sullivan-tells-biden-threaten-to-sink-iranian-spy-ships>)

165. Marc Rod, “U.S. should respond to Houthi attacks ‘twice as hard,’ Ricketts says, as lawmakers weigh in on potential strike,” *Jewish Insider*, December 7, 2023. (<https://jewishinsider.com/2023/12/u-s-yemen-houthi-attacks-iran-biden-senate-lawmakers>)

166. “Houthis likely made a mistake: Gen. Jack Keane,” *Mornings with Maria*, February 13, 2024. (<https://www.foxbusiness.com/video/6346791525112>)

efforts. Yet its success is hardly assured. Interdiction and airstrikes may become a cat-and-mouse game against an adaptable adversary in Yemen's vast territory and with numerous blind spots. And even if Iranian weapon stockpiles were eliminated and resupply blocked, the Houthis could turn to lower-tech options like ATGMs or commercially available drones, using innovative tactics or greater scale to achieve their goals. Previous experience indicates that the group is capable of modifying or repurposing existing means to that end.¹⁶⁷ For instance, they might harass maritime traffic with swarms of speedboats armed with ATGMs.¹⁶⁸

The United States should achieve what it can by targeting Houthi military facilities, and Trump has launched more aggressive strikes.¹⁶⁹ He also redesignated the group as an FTO,¹⁷⁰ but a broader strategy remains essential. The next section addresses this challenge.

Toward a More Comprehensive and Effective Strategy for the Houthi Problem

Some analysts have argued that the Houthis cannot be deterred.¹⁷¹ This is incorrect.¹⁷² All regimes have interests and pressure points and, therefore, can be compelled to move in particular directions. In the short term, the United States and its security partners should focus on three specific Houthi vulnerabilities to maximize pressure for a permanent end to their campaign against Israel and Red Sea commerce. Washington and its security partners should target high-value regime

stockpiles, especially of hard currency and fuel, with airstrikes; employ powerful images of key assets being destroyed to puncture the Houthi aura of invincibility; and target Houthi leadership of key organs of regime control. In the medium- to long-term, the United States and its security partners should pursue a broader effort to disrupt the Houthis' control of Yemen's internet, revitalize sanctions enforcement, slash Houthi revenues from Hodeidah port, block the access of the Houthi banking system to global financial networks, isolate the Houthis diplomatically, and strengthen their rivals within Yemen.

Short-Term Measures

Physically Target Regime Stockpiles of Foreign Currency, Fuel, and Other Stores of Value

In addition to focusing on weaponry, a comprehensive strategy should target the Houthis' economic vulnerability along with the weakness of their domestic support and, finally, their leadership. As described above, the regime is under significant economic pressure, with limited revenue sources and a longstanding inability to pay public sector salaries. Accordingly, Washington and its partners should physically target the regime's key stockpiles of valuable goods such as foreign currency.¹⁷³ This could trigger a crisis, especially if the Houthis fail to provide promised goods or cash to loyalists. It may even destabilize the regime, similar to how the Houthis seized power in 2014 after fuel subsidies were

167. "Unconventional Houthi War Tactics," *Navanti Group*, September 27, 2018. (<https://navantigroup.com/yemen/2018-9-27-unconventional-houthi-war-tactics>)

168. U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "Seized at Sea: Iranian Weapons Smuggled to the Houthis," July 14, 2024. (https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Seized_at_Sea.pdf)

169. Phil Stewart and Mohammed Ghobari, "Trump launches large-scale strikes on Yemen's Houthis, at least 31 killed," *Reuters*, March 16, 2025. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-launches-strikes-against-yemens-houthis-warns-iran-2025-03-15>)

170. David Gritten, "Trump re-designates Yemen's Houthis as Foreign Terrorist Organisation," *BBC* (UK), January 23, 2025. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4g92ny391go>)

171. @i24NEWS_EN, X, March 7, 2024. (https://x.com/i24NEWS_EN/status/1765826606101061995)

172. Graham Allison, "Why ISIS Fears Israel," *The National Interest*, August 8, 2016. (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-isis-fears-israel-17286>)

173. "PHOTOS: Houthi administrator with loads of cash as Yemenis await salaries," *Al-Arabiya* (Saudi Arabia), July 22, 2017. (<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2017/07/22/Photos-Houthi-administrator-siphons-off-salary-funds-for-Yemen-employees->); "Islamic State: Up to \$800m of funds 'destroyed by strikes,'" *BBC* (UK), April 26, 2016. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36145301>)

removed.¹⁷⁴ The looming threat of such a crisis might push the Houthis to declare an end to all attacks and threats against Israeli and Red Sea targets.

Select Targets Whose Destruction Punctures the Houthi Aura of Invincibility

The Houthis have invested heavily in building an image of invincibility.¹⁷⁵ Through their control of Yemeni media, the Houthis inflate their successes and hide their failures. For example, they fabricated claims of damaging the U.S. aircraft carrier Dwight D. Eisenhower after failing to do so.¹⁷⁶ Well-planned strikes could demolish the Houthi narrative.

In December 2023, the author suggested, “If the Houthis are [seeking] international prestige, the best way to convince them to stop doing so in destructive and dangerous ways is to create consequences that make them look foolish.”¹⁷⁷ Israel’s strikes on Hodeidah port, which produced powerful images of a critical Houthi asset engulfed in flames, were superb examples of a kinetic action that severely damaged the group’s aura of invincibility. This combines both military actions, which have real-world consequences for Houthi resources, and intangible reputational damage, which may make the population less inclined to cooperate with Houthi mobilization efforts or more inclined to resist the regime. Unfortunately, the attacks on Hodeidah were the exception rather than the rule, and there has not been a consistently eye-catching response to every Houthi launch. If there were, it might compel the group to avoid provocations rather than risk the further erosion of their carefully cultivated image.



Houthi Mouthpiece al-Masirah notes in its August 4, 2024, headlines, “Western Media: Yemen is tenacious and so degrading its capabilities is a losing bet.” (Source: al-Masirah)

Directly Targeting Houthi leadership

It is worth taking aim at what corporate leaders often describe as an organization’s most essential asset

174. Mohammed Ghobari, “Tens of thousands of Yemeni Houthis protest against fuel reform, government,” *Reuters*, August 18, 2014. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/tens-of-thousands-of-yemeni-houthis-protest-against-fuel-reform-government-idUSKBN0GI1O4>)
175. Ari Heistein, “The Houthi Regime is an Integrated Propaganda Machine,” *The Cipher Brief*, March 13, 2024. (https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/the-houthi-regime-is-an-integrated-propaganda-machine)
176. “US official says Houthi claim of attacking US aircraft carrier in Red Sea is ‘incorrect,’” *Reuters*, June 22, 2024. (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/us-official-says-houthi-claim-of-attacking-us-aircraft-carrier-in-red-sea-is-incorrect)
177. Ari Heistein, “Deterring the Houthis requires more than a textbook response,” *The Times of Israel* (Israel), December 17, 2023. (<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/deterring-the-houthis-requires-more-than-a-textbook-response>)

— people.¹⁷⁸ Some of the regime’s senior officials, like Abdelmalik al-Houthi, are deep in hiding, never take public meetings, and may take years to locate. But other officials responsible for malign activities at home and abroad could be easier to target, for example, the leadership of the Security and Intelligence Service. The SIS’s work consists primarily of ensuring that the Houthi regime maintains control over the Yemeni public, and it is also reportedly involved in smuggling Iranian weapons into Yemen.¹⁷⁹ Targeting senior SIS officials in response to ongoing Houthi attacks could both undermine the regime’s control and disrupt Houthi procurement. The Trump administration’s reported assassination of Abdulrab “Abu Taha” Jarfan, the former senior SIS official responsible for Abdelmalek’s personal protection, could be a significant first step in that direction.¹⁸⁰

It is an open question whether assassinations can substantially degrade an adversary’s capability or willingness to fight. Israel’s campaign against senior and mid-level leaders of Hezbollah appears to have forced the group to sue for a ceasefire.¹⁸¹ Yet the breadth and precision of that campaign was extraordinary. It may be difficult to match when dealing with Yemen, where targets are around 1,000 miles away from major U.S. and Israeli airbases, whereas Beirut is 50 miles from the Israeli border. In less favorable circumstances, leadership strikes could result in the promotion of replacements potentially more capable, as seen in the case of Lebanese Hezbollah, whose first leader, Abbas Musawi, was assassinated by Israel in 1992. Musawi

was replaced by the charismatic strategist Hassan Nasrallah.¹⁸² Nasrallah, too, was eventually assassinated by Israel, but before that, he managed to survive for over 30 years and transform Hezbollah into one of the most powerful Arab fighting forces in the Middle East.

Simply killing several pivotal figures will not necessarily translate into organizational collapse.¹⁸³ But the targeting of Houthi leadership is not intended to convince the Houthis to lay down their arms or to cause irreparable damage to the regime. Instead, it aims to surprise the Houthis by imposing an unexpectedly disruptive cost, forcing them to pause, regroup, and then proceed with greater caution. While the group’s response to such strikes is uncertain, the Houthis’ ability to escalate beyond the extent of its ongoing campaign appears limited since it has already employed its full suite of existing capabilities against Israel and Red Sea maritime traffic.

Coping With the Long-Term Threat: Eroding the Key Pillars of the Regime

While Yemen may be a difficult place to live at the moment, the Houthis’ strategic environment is fairly tolerable.¹⁸⁴ They have decimated local opposition, divided their Yemeni rivals, cowed their neighbors, and largely deterred global powers. As such, they were in no rush to sign a peace deal with Saudi Arabia, even after opening up additional fronts by launching attacks on Red Sea shipping and Israel. The initial success of that campaign may have left the Houthis with the impression that the momentum was in their favor.

178. Authors often attribute this idea to former Xerox CEO Anne Mulcahy, who said, “Employees are a company’s greatest asset – they’re your competitive advantage.” See: Leo Bottary, “CEOs in 2020: Employees are people, not assets,” *CEO World*, August 13, 2020. (<https://ceoworld.biz/2020/08/13/ceos-in-2020-employees-are-people-not-assets/>)

179. “مليشيا الحوثي تهرب الأسلحة للسودان.. تفاصيل اقرأ المزيد” [Houthi Militia Smuggles Weapons to Sudan], *May 4 News* (Yemen), April 27, 2023. (<https://www.4may.net/news/91080>)

180. @michaelh992, X, March 16, 2025. (<https://x.com/michaelh992/status/1901342277001486731>)

181. Tal Beeri, “The Ceasefire Between Israel and Lebanon Does Not Guarantee Peace and Does not Guarantee Security,” *The Alma Research and Education Center*, November 27, 2024. (<https://israel-alma.org/the-ceasefire-between-israel-and-lebanon-does-not-guarantee-peace-and-does-not-guarantee-security>)

182. Nicholas Blanford, “Twenty-eight years ago Hezbollah’s leader was assassinated, and Israel paid a price,” *Atlantic Council*, January 6, 2020. (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/twenty-eight-years-ago-hezbollahs-leader-was-assassinated-and-israel-paid-a-price>)

183. Ari Heistein, “Defeating the Houthis Will Require More Than Killing Their Chief,” *War on the Rocks*, February 13, 2025. (<https://warontherocks.com/2025/02/defeating-the-houthis-will-require-more-than-killing-their-chief>)

184. Fatima Abo Alasrar, “For Yemen’s Houthis, the status quo is the key to power,” *Middle East Institute*, March 25, 2021. (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/yemens-houthis-status-quo-key-power>)

But the tides may now be shifting in light of setbacks experienced by the Axis of Resistance, which could explain reports that the Houthis are now urgently seeking to reach an agreement with Saudi Arabia and have allegedly agreed to major concessions in order to finalize a deal.¹⁸⁵ An effective long-term strategy should aim to shift momentum further against the Houthis by undermining four key pillars of their regime: information dominance, revenue streams, foreign support, and the weakness of opposition inside Yemen.

Promote Alternatives to Houthi-Controlled Internet Service Providers

Since 2014, the Houthis have controlled Yemen's internet in their own domain as well as that of the IRG. This is a source of hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenues and enables the regime to limit and monitor how Yemenis use the internet.¹⁸⁶ It is also part of an integrated strategy to create a Houthi information bubble that isolates the population from ideas and information harmful to Houthi interests. For years, the IRG has been working to create an alternative internet service known as Adennet, but its coverage is extremely limited.¹⁸⁷

The anti-Houthi coalition should meet this challenge by promoting an “infrastructure light” alternative to Houthi-run internet service providers TeleYemen and YemenNet. Satellite-based internet provider Starlink was recently granted official authorization for use in Yemen and is already operational.¹⁸⁸ The IRG should

encourage the use of alternative service providers and should seek to reach an agreement with Starlink on setting reduced introductory rates that would be more affordable to millions of Yemenis. If successful, this effort could deprive the Houthis of many millions of dollars in revenue as well as the valuable intelligence that they currently reap from their internet monopoly.

Expose Houthi Abuses and Revitalize Sanctions Enforcement

Western governments could combat the Houthis' externally focused information operations¹⁸⁹ by promoting public awareness of Houthi crimes. They can do so by declassifying relevant information, including but not limited to diplomatic cables, about Houthi atrocities and presenting it periodically in an accessible format in addition to the State Department's annual long-form reports.¹⁹⁰ This would help expose a detention system that is believed to rival that of the former Assad regime in Syria in its brutality, a recruitment network that indoctrinates and deploys many thousands of child soldiers,¹⁹¹ and an economic system that diverts resources from Yemen's poorest to feed the Houthi war machine.¹⁹² Exposing this to the public would prevent the Houthis from leveraging false narratives in order to gain sympathy or weaken international resolve.

Western governments should also enhance general awareness of the menacing nature of the regime by ramping up public diplomacy efforts, including with

185. “زيارة حوثية سرية إلى السعودية” [To Escape the Fate of Hezbollah: A Secret Houthi Visit to Saudi Arabia], *Al-Ayyam* (Yemen), December 3, 2024. (<https://www.alayyam.info/news/A1AICNU6-587CKR-9C6B>); “الحوثيون يستجدون السعودية التوقيع على خارطة الطريق ويوافقون على تنازلات مثيرة بينها إلغاء بند الرواتب Including Cancellation of Salaries Clause,” *Al-Mashhad News* (Yemen), December 16, 2024. (<https://www.almashhadnews.com/298134>)
186. Saleh Fadhl and Camilla Sacchetto, “Reforming Yemen's telecommunications sector,” *The International Growth Centre*, February 2023. (https://www.theigc.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Fadhl%20and%20Sacchetto%20Final%20report%20February%202023_EN_0.pdf)
187. “A New Internet Service Provider in Yemen: new division or additional service for users?” *SMEX*, September 5, 2018. (<https://smex.org/a-new-internet-service-provider-in-yemen-new-division-or-additional-service-for-users>)
188. @Starlink, X, September 18, 2024. (<https://x.com/Starlink/status/1836169600142315648>)
189. Hannah Porter, “Houthi Propaganda Finally Reaches Global Audiences,” *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, February 15, 2024. (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/houthi-propaganda-finally-reaches-global-audiences-163934>)
190. U.S. Department of State, “2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Yemen,” accessed March 26, 2025. (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/yemen>)
191. “Yemen: Houthis Recruit More Child Soldiers Since October 7,” *Human Rights Watch*, February 13, 2024. (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/13/yemen-houthis-recruit-more-child-soldiers-october-7>)
192. Ari Heistein and Nathaniel Rabkin, “Houthi Diversion of Humanitarian Assistance in Yemen,” *Counter Extremism Project*, June 2024. (<https://www.counterextremism.com/content/houthi-diversion-humanitarian-assistance-yemen>)

a dedicated staff to monitor and engage international media and debunk the notion that the brutal Houthi regime is in any way defending Yemen or its people.

Additionally, the U.S. government should revitalize its lackluster effort to impose sanctions on those responsible for human rights abuses, corruption, and destabilizing actions. Washington should make full use of the Global Magnitsky Sanctions Program¹⁹³ targeting corruption and Executive Order 13611, which targets those who threaten the “peace, security, or stability of Yemen.”¹⁹⁴

Cut Off Four Key Sources of Revenue

- **Stop Diversion of Humanitarian Aid**

Over the past decade, three-quarters of the approximately \$2 billion annual budget for humanitarian assistance in Yemen flowed to Houthi-controlled areas.¹⁹⁵ The regime exercises nearly complete control over humanitarian activities in its territory and has a long record of using this power to skim funds and repurpose goods in accordance

with its own interests.¹⁹⁶ Donor states that fund both UN humanitarian programs and nongovernmental assistance must demand improved transparency to ensure the Houthis do not continue to hijack their contributions. Pressure from donors is essential since UN agencies have demonstrated that they very rarely challenge Houthi abuses.¹⁹⁷ Negligent organizations (including UN agencies) or those that cover up Houthi diversions should lose funding and suffer the legal consequences of providing material support to an FTO.

- **Enforce the Hodeidah Port Agreement**

The taxes collected from Hodeidah port are a source of hundreds of millions of dollars of annual revenue¹⁹⁸ for the Houthis. As part of the 2018 Stockholm Agreement, which compelled the Saudi-led coalition to halt its offensive, the Houthis agreed to turn the port over to a neutral third party and allocate the revenues from the port to pay public sector salaries. However, the Houthis have failed to abide by any of these terms. In addition, they have pushed as much commercial traffic as possible to the

193. “The Global Magnitsky Sanctions Program,” *U.S. Department of State*, accessed September 30, 2024. (<https://www.state.gov/global-magnitsky-act>)

194. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, “Executive Order Blocking Property of Persons Threatening the Peace, Security, or Stability of Yemen,” May 16, 2012. (<https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20120516>)

195. As precise statistics are not provided by the UN/INGOs operating in Yemen, this estimate is based on rough calculations included in the recent publication “Houthi Diversion of Humanitarian Assistance in Yemen” by the Count Extremism Program. The report uses the World Food Programme’s General Food Assistance program, the largest program carried out by the largest UN/INGO operating in Yemen, as a benchmark for how resources are allocated between Houthi-controlled and IRG-controlled areas. While there were reports that the WFP had ceased activities in Houthi-controlled areas as of December 2023, by the summer of 2024, it appears to have resumed activities in most areas. See: Ari Heistein and Nathaniel Rabkin, “Houthi Diversion of Humanitarian Assistance in Yemen,” *Counter Extremism Project*, June 2024. (<https://www.counterextremism.com/content/houthi-diversion-humanitarian-assistance-yemen>); “World Food Programme pauses distribution in north Yemen as funds limited,” *Reuters*, December 5, 2023. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/world-food-programme-pauses-distribution-north-yemen-funds-limited-2023-12-05>); “World Food Programme Resumes Limited Aid Distribution in Houthi-Controlled Areas After Six-Month Halt,” *Barran Press* (Yemen), July 3, 2024. (<https://en.barran.press/news/topic/3365>); “Emergency: Yemen,” *World Food Programme*, accessed January 8, 2025. (<https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/yemen-emergency>)

196. Maggie Michael, “AP Investigation: Food aid stolen as Yemen starves,” *Associated Press*, December 31, 2018. (<https://apnews.com/article/famine-bcf4e7595b554029bcd372cb129c49ab>)

197. Houthi abuses extend far beyond the hijacking of aid and include the kidnapping of dozens of local UN/INGO staff over the past year.

198. Saeed Al-Batati, “Houthis pocket millions of dollars of public funds say UN experts,” *Arab News* (Saudi Arabia), March 2, 2023. (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2260541/middle-east>); United Nations Security Council, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014),” October 11, 2024. (<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/259/53/pdf/n2425953.pdf>)

port¹⁹⁹ to maximize their control over the Yemeni economy, increase tax revenues, and starve the IRG of much-needed income.

Given Houthi exploitation, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) should stop spending millions per year to refurbish the port.²⁰⁰ Washington should press the UNDP to shut down these refurbishment projects immediately unless the Houthis quickly move to comply with their commitments regarding Hodeidah. In addition, the United States and its partners should discourage the use of aid money to purchase goods that are shipped via Hodeidah (or any of the other Houthi-controlled ports) so long as the Houthis refuse to meet their obligations under the Stockholm Agreement.

Promoting the port of Aden as the key logistical hub for international aid would reduce Houthi revenue from import duties and return some of the lost revenue to the IRG. According to some estimates, the Houthi regime's policies to draw maritime traffic from Aden to Hodeidah have cost the IRG about \$500 million per year.²⁰¹ In addition, pushing more traffic to Aden would diminish Houthi control over the entry of resources into Yemen and thereby hinder their ability to divert aid at scale or create artificial shortages to profit from inflated black market prices.

To be clear, this approach would also create some additional logistical challenges and expenses in terms of transporting goods from Aden to areas in northern Yemen. The United Nations and INGOs

operating in Houthi-controlled Yemen may initially resist such a mandate under that pretense, but ultimately, they will have little choice but to comply with their donors' demands.

Shifting commercial traffic from Hodeidah to Aden would not prevent the Houthis from taxing merchants and extorting citizens under their control. However, a shift to Aden would make controlling aid (and the economy more broadly) much more complicated for the Houthis, as they will no longer be in control of Yemen's key commercial artery and instead will need to keep track of the diffuse import of goods over a vast landmass.

• Cut Off the Houthi Banking System

Since 2014, there have been parallel Houthi and IRG banking systems in Sanaa and Aden, respectively. Many Houthi-controlled banks continue to enjoy international access while simultaneously undermining the IRG economy. In April 2024, the IRG rescinded recognition of banks based in Sanaa unless they moved to Aden, cutting them off from the SWIFT worldwide financial messaging system. In response, the Houthis threatened Saudi Arabia with missile and drone strikes until the kingdom pressed the IRG to reverse itself, which it did reluctantly as part of a UN-brokered agreement.²⁰²

Major financial institutions under Houthi control, like the Central Bank of Yemen-Sanaa (CBY-Sanaa), have engaged in terror financing schemes benefiting

199. Mohammed Nasser, "UN Experts Condemn Yemen's Houthis for Hampering Aid Delivery," *Asharq al-Awsat* (UK), March 3, 2023. (<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4189821/un-experts-condemn-yemen%E2%80%99s-houthis-hampering-aid-delivery>)

200. United Nations Development Programme, "Peace Support Facility – Annual Work Plan for 2023," March 28, 2024. (<https://undpngddlsprod01.blob.core.windows.net/awp/00118265.pdf>); "Rehabilitation of the Oil Berth No 1, Hodeidah Port, Hodeidah, Yemen," *United Nations Development Programme*, April 23, 2024. (https://procurement-notices.undp.org/view_negotiation.cfm?nego_id=18872)

201. Ned Whalley, "Challenges to Yemen's Public Revenues," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, December 19, 2023. (<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/21490>)

202. Nada AlTaher and Fareed Rahman, "Swift system restored in Houthi-held areas under Yemen de-escalation deal," *The National* (UAE), July 25, 2024. (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/07/25/swift-system-restored-in-houthi-held-areas-under-yemen-de-escalation-deal>); Hans Grundberg, "Statement by the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, July 23, 2024. (<https://osesgy.unmissions.org/statement-office-un-special-envoy-yemen>)



Men walk next to artwork depicting Yemen's Houthi movement senior figures, Lebanon's late Hezbollah leader, and Iranian commanders placed on a street on March 7, 2025, in Sanaa, Yemen. Yemen's Houthi movement leader, said on Friday to resume naval missile-drone attacks Israel if it did not lift its blockade of aid into the Gaza Strip within four days. (Photo by Mohammed Hamoud/Getty Images)

the Houthis,²⁰³ Hezbollah,²⁰⁴ and Hamas.²⁰⁵ The Biden administration was right to sanction the governor of CBY-Sanaa, Hashem al-Madani, for his role in arms trafficking and money laundering,²⁰⁶ but targeting only individuals while leaving the major financial institutions they control immune was a mistake. Three days before leaving office, the Biden administration designated the Yemen Kuwait Bank and explained, “The Houthis rely on a few key financial institutions like Yemen Kuwait Bank to access the international financial system and finance their destabilizing attacks in the region.”²⁰⁷

The Trump administration must build on these steps by designating the remainder of Houthi-controlled banks based in Sanaa and their senior officers to deprive the Houthis of access to legitimate financial institutions, disrupt terror finance, and safeguard the integrity of the global financial system. For example, the Houthi-run CBY-Sanaa should be sanctioned to deny it legitimacy while its primary function is to serve the financial interests of an FTO. Other financial institutions that likely warrant sanctions include:

- The Yemen Post banking system, which has facilitated terror financing schemes.²⁰⁸ It remains unsanctioned, evidently able to send international bank transfers,²⁰⁹ and its app, “Yemen Wallet,” remains readily available in Google’s app store.²¹⁰
- The Cooperative and Agricultural Credit Bank (Sanaa),²¹¹ which is based in Houthi-controlled areas and is led by a Houthi appointee related to Abdelmalek. It remains very much connected to the global financial system.²¹²
- The four remaining banks, besides Yemen Kuwait Bank and International Bank of Yemen, the IRG sought to cut off from SWIFT in April 2024 are: Tadhamon Bank, Shamil Bank of Yemen and Bahrain, Al-Amal Microfinance Bank, and Al-

203. SAMymenradio, *Telegram*, December 23, 2019. (<https://t.me/SAMymenradio/6026>)

204. SAMymenradio, *Telegram*, November 16, 2024. (<https://t.me/SAMymenradio/48881>)

205. Wadah al-Jalil, “حرب غزة: ... فرصة حوثية لفرض الجبايات ونهب الأموال» [Gaza War: The Houthis’ Opportunity to Impose Taxes and Loot],” *Al-Arabiya* (Saudi Arabia), October 30, 2023. (<https://aawsat.com/الأموال-ونهب-الجبايات-فرصة-حوثية-لفرض-الجبايات-نهب-الأموال>)

206. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, “Treasury Maintains Pressure on Houthi Procurement and Financing Schemes,” December 19, 2024. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2757>)

207. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, “Treasury Increases Financial Pressure on the Houthis,” January 17, 2025. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2794>)

208. “The Houthis and U.S.-Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” *Counter Extremism Project*, September 2023. (https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-09/The%20Houthis%20and%20U.S.-Designated%20Foreign%20Terrorist%20Organizations_Sept%202023.pdf)

209. “الحالات المالية [Money Transfers],” accessed March 26, 2025. (<https://www.post.ye/web/index.php/financial-services/per-mon/money-fast>)

210. “Yemen Wallet,” *Google Play*, updated March 13, 2025. (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.s2m.yemenpost.customer.android&hl=en>)

211. “محفظة موبايل موني [Mobile Money Wallet],” *Cooperative & Agricultural Credit Bank*, accessed March 26, 2025. (<https://cacbank.com.ye>)

212. “مليشيا الحوثي تُعين أحد أقارب زعيمها رئيساً لأحد أهم المؤسسات المصرفية الحكومية [Houthi Militia Appoints One of Its Leader’s Relatives as Head of One of the Most Important Government Banking Institutions],” *Alsharaea* (Yemen), August 24, 2022. (<https://alsharaeanews.com/2020/07/22/9929>); “Cooperative and Agricultural Credit Bank (Headquarter) BIC / Swift code details,” *Wise*, accessed March 26, 2025. (<https://wise.com/gb/swift-codes/CACBYESAXXX>)

Kuraimi Islamic Microfinance Bank.²¹³ While CBY-Aden reported that several of these banks have recently moved their headquarters to Aden in order to reduce the risk of sanctions against them,²¹⁴ it is necessary to investigate the degree to which the continued operation of branches in areas under Houthi control creates risks that they will be engaged in financing regime activities.

- Omani banks must be closely examined for illicit transactions to the Houthis. Several corporations and privately controlled businesses in Oman are servicing the Houthi economy and even supplying the group with arms. These entities must be exposed and designated by the U.S. Treasury. Similarly, more must be done to prevent bulk cash smuggling across the border between Oman and Yemen. Muscat must begin to feel pressure from the international community to address a threat finance challenge that has gone unchecked for too long.

The United States should also encourage partners to follow suit on efforts to disrupt Houthi financial activity abroad. Australia and Canada, which have already designated the Houthis as a terrorist organization,²¹⁵ should follow through on their designation by outlawing ties with Houthi-controlled financial institutions. Other allies, such as the United Kingdom and European partners, should be encouraged to designate the group and then criminalize the financial institutions it controls accordingly.

• **Ensure Shipping Agencies Are Not Paying Protection Money to the Houthis**

Finally, the United States and its partners should investigate claims from the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen that shipping agencies are paying the Houthi regime for safe passage through the Red Sea.²¹⁶ If true, this modern-day piracy may constitute a significant source of income for the regime. If this activity is verified, steps should be taken to halt all funds flowing to the Houthis and hold accountable the shipping companies that pay terrorist organizations for protection.

Isolate the Houthis Diplomatically and Strengthen Rivals Within Yemen

While the Iranians may have invented the idea of building a “ring of fire” around U.S. partners in the Middle East,²¹⁷ Washington ought to consider how it can create a similarly hostile strategic environment for the Houthis. Specifically, Washington should pursue several lines of attack:

• **Disrupt International Houthi Networks**

Place international pressure on countries such as Oman and Turkey to stop providing safe haven to the Houthi organization and its leadership.²¹⁸ The Trump administration’s March 2025 sanctioning of at least four senior Houthi officials operating out of Oman was an important step forward in this process,

213. United Nations Security Council, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014),” October 11, 2024. (<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/259/53/pdf/n2425953.pdf>)

214. cby_hq, X, March 16, 2025. (https://x.com/cby_hq/status/1901388801752158364)

215. Public Safety of Canada, News Release, “Government of Canada lists Ansarallah as a terrorist entity,” December 2, 2024. (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2024/12/government-of-canada-lists-ansarallah-as-a-terrorist-entity.html>); Australian National Security, “Ansar Allah,” September 22, 2024. (<https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/what-australia-is-doing/terrorist-organisations/listed-terrorist-organisations/ansar-allah>)

216. United Nations Security Council, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014),” October 11, 2024. (<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/259/53/pdf/n2425953.pdf>)

217. Yaakov Amidror, “Iran’s ‘Ring of Fire,’” *Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security*, April 8, 2024. (<https://jiss.org.il/en/amidror-irans-ring-of-fire>)

218. Farea Al-Muslimi, “In Exile in Turkey, Yemen’s Muslim Brothers Cling to Caliphate Dreams,” *New Lines Magazine*, May 23, 2024. (<https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/in-exile-in-turkey-yemens-muslim-brothers-cling-to-caliphate-dreams>)

but it has not disabled Houthi activities abroad.²¹⁹ Additional steps are required to defeat the Houthis' ability to use third countries as waypoints²²⁰ and bases of operations for illicit procurement and money laundering.

- **Exact a Price From the Houthis' Patrons**

Continuously target Hezbollah and IRGC-QF advisers in Yemen, including those serving in the "Iranian Embassy" in Sanaa, to raise the cost of the Houthis' axis partners' involvement in Yemen.

- **Normalization**

Washington should take the lead in brokering talks between Israel and those Arab actors that constitute the anti-Houthi coalition. On the basis of a shared threat emanating from the Axis of Resistance as well as Israel's demonstrated ability to inflict considerable damage on Iran-backed groups like Hezbollah,²²¹ it is conceivable that Arab governments opposing the Houthis may partner with Israel both within Yemen and in the broader region. Partnerships with a powerful and engaged military force like that of Israel could also encourage Arab states to take a more aggressive stance against the Houthis despite Sanaa's ongoing efforts to intimidate the Gulf states with military threats.²²²

- **Facilitate the Unity of Anti-Houthi Forces Within Yemen**

The three main anti-Houthi entities within Yemen are the Southern Transitional Council, the National Resistance Council, and the Islah

Party. While Washington should not get bogged down in the internal politics of the anti-Houthi coalition in Yemen, it should lay down three basic prerequisites for offering support: renouncing the use of violence to settle disputes within the anti-Houthi coalition, respecting a basic standard of human rights, and renouncing support for terrorist groups. The United States and its allies should then offer more advanced training and equipment to improve the effectiveness of anti-Houthi fighting forces, with a particular focus on the STC, which appears to be better poised to benefit from U.S. assistance than some of its peers.

- **Demonstrate Power and Unity of Purpose**

In recent years, the United States, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen were among 50 countries to participate in the annual U.S.-led maritime military exercises known as International Maritime Exercise/Cutlass Express (IMX-CE).²²³ Washington would be well-advised to organize additional events tailored for its partners in the anti-Houthi coalition, including those forces located in Yemen, at an increased frequency and with greater visibility. This would be aimed at enhancing deterrence and preparing regional forces to work together in defense against future Houthi attacks.

- **Shared Intelligence and Learning**

The United States should bring its partners into an intelligence-sharing consortium to warn of and defend against Houthi threats. Israel is already quietly engaged in such an effort, as are some of the

219. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Targets Houthi Leaders Involved in Smuggling and Procuring Weapons," March 5, 2025. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0041>)

220. It is worth noting that Houthi officials flew via Amman, Jordan, to attend the funerals of Hezbollah leaders, including Hassan Nasrallah. It is not clear why the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, a U.S. ally, allowed these individuals to transit via Queen Alia International Airport to attend this event. @Mazin_Hebah, X, February 26, 2025. (https://x.com/Mazin_Hebah/status/1894731334121066951)

221. Patrick Jackson, "Hezbollah confirms death of Nasrallah's heir apparent," *BBC* (UK), October 23, 2024. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cm242380133o>)

222. @Se2Bin, X, July 7, 2024. (<https://x.com/Se2Bin/status/1809972605174108291>)

223. Anna Ahronheim, "Israel participates in large scale US-led naval exercise alongside Saudi, Yemen," *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), February 1, 2022. (<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-695183>); Ari Cicurel, "Expanding Middle East Maritime Security Cooperation," *Jewish Institute for National Security of America*, March 10, 2023. (https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/expand-navcent-maritime-security-cooperation)

Gulf states. Among other areas of focus, participants could share best practices for defense against the advanced Houthi platforms, including those provided by Iran, Russia, or China.²²⁴

Conclusion

These combined efforts to undermine the Houthi regime while strengthening its adversaries are not quick fixes. Instead, they serve to apply increasing internal and external pressures by targeting the regime's critical vulnerabilities. Because the Houthis are likely to adapt to some aspects of this strategy, it is crucial for policymakers to remain consistent, vigilant, and flexible. They should adjust strategies as needed to sustain maximum political, economic, and military pressure.

The long-term strategic goal of this approach is to force the Houthis to face an extremely unpleasant choice: End their rogue behavior or risk the collapse of their regime. Given the organization's aggressive and ideological nature, it may continue its destabilizing activities regardless of the price. If so, undermining the regime would be the only reliable way to eliminate the Houthi threat. Any alternative measures — such as ceasefire agreements or deterrence strategies — would merely provide the group with opportunities to regroup, rearm, and prepare for future conflicts against the United States and its security partners.

In the end, however, no strategy to counter the Houthis will be complete without a sustained effort to undermine the group's primary patron in Tehran. The Houthis are but a tentacle of the regime. Targeting the head of the octopus remains Israel's strategy when it comes to dealing with Hamas and Hezbollah. The wisdom of such a strategy also applies to Ansar Allah.

²²⁴ U.S. Central Command, Press Release, "USCENTCOM Seizes Iranian Advanced Conventional Weapons Bound for Houthis," January 16, 2024. (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3645241/uscentcom-seizes-iranian-advanced-conventional-weapons-bound-for-houthis>); Guy Azriel, "China helping Houthis obtain weapons for unmolested Red Sea passage," *i24News* (Israel), January 2, 2025. (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/artc-china-helping-houthis-obtain-advanced-weapons-for-free-passage>)

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