



Republican Policy Committee Backgrounder: Military Operations against the Houthis

The Biden Administration's Weakness toward the Houthis

Over the last two years, Iranian backed Houthi terrorists attacked U.S. Navy warships and commercial global shipping in hundreds of instances. The Biden administration not only failed to address the threat the Houthi's posed to the lives of U.S. service members and the global economy, but also weakened America's posture in the face of terrorism. In former President Biden's first month in office, he removed the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation from the Houthis, which President Trump had issued in January 2021.¹ In 2024, as the Houthis increased targeted attacks on ships, the Biden administration levied weaker sanctions than the FTO designation carries,² and attempted coalition strikes which President Biden admitted were ineffective in deterring Houthi terror.³

Trump Administration Counters Houthi Terrorism

Within President Trump's first week of office, he redesignated the FTO designation for Houthis which immediately increased sanctions against them. President Trump initiated a significant military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen on March 15, 2025. The strikes, conducted by air and naval assets, targeted dozens of Houthi-controlled sites, including radars, air-defense systems, drone launch points, and missile systems, with the primary aim of opening international shipping lanes in the Red Sea, which the Houthis had disrupted for months.⁴

President Trump, when announcing the campaign, described it as "decisive and powerful Military action," stating that the Houthis "have waged an unrelenting campaign of piracy, violence, and terrorism against American, and other, ships, aircraft, and drones."⁵ Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, further stated on March 16, 2025, that the strikes would continue indefinitely until the Houthis cease attacks, saying, "The minute the Houthis say 'we'll stop shooting at your ships, we'll stop shooting at your drones,' this campaign will end, but until then it will be unrelenting."⁶

In reference to the campaign, National Security Adviser Mike Waltz stated, "President Trump has decided to hit the Houthis and hit them hard, as opposed to, in the last administration, where

¹ [White House: FACT SHEET: President Donald J. Trump Re-designates the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization](#)

² [Press release: Stefanik Statement on Joe Biden's Weaker Terrorist Designation of Iranian-Backed Houthi Terrorists](#)

³ [CNBC: Houthis embrace 'direct confrontation' with U.S. as Biden admits airstrikes aren't working](#)

⁴ [The New York Times: Trump Orders U.S. Strikes](#)

⁵ [U.S. launches multiple strikes against Houthi targets as Trump says attacks on American vessels "must stop" - CBS News](#)

⁶ [The Guardian: U.S. says airstrikes will continue](#)

literally weeks or months would go by with these kind of one-off pinprick attacks. And, as a result, we have had one of the world's most critical sea lanes get shut down.”⁷

President Trump also warned Iran stating, “To Iran: Support for the Houthi terrorists must end IMMEDIATELY! Do NOT threaten the American People, their President, who has received one of the largest mandates in Presidential History, or Worldwide shipping lanes. If you do, BEWARE, because America will hold you fully accountable and, we won’t be nice about it!”⁸

On March 17, President Trump added that: “The hundreds of attacks being made by Houthi, the sinister mobsters and thugs based in Yemen, who are hated by the Yemeni people, all emanate from, and are created by, IRAN. Iran is dictating every move, giving them the weapons, supplying them with money and highly sophisticated Military equipment, and even, so-called, ‘Intelligence.’ Every shot fired by the Houthis will be looked upon, from this point forward, as being a shot fired from the weapons and leadership of IRAN, and IRAN will be held responsible, and suffer the consequences, and those consequences will be dire!”⁹

Iranian officials, including Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Hossein Salami, responded on March 16, 2025, claiming that the Houthis acted independently of Iran and warning, "Iran will respond decisively and destructively if they take their threats into action.”¹⁰ Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi condemned the strikes as a "gross violation" of international law, and called for an end to U.S. support for Israel.¹¹

Impact of Trump Administration Military Strikes

U.S. airstrikes have continued to attack Houthi positions in Yemen throughout the last week. In response to President Trump’s current military campaign, the Houthis claimed two attacks within 24 hours on the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) and its accompanying warships in the Red Sea, with no damage being reported to U.S. ships.¹²

U.S. airstrikes have hit key areas, including Sanaa, Saada, and Hodeidah, with a power station in Dahyan, Saada, causing a power cut.¹³ The Houthis' political bureau labeled the attacks a "war crime," vowing escalation and stating, "If they continue their aggression, we will continue the escalation.”¹⁴

⁷ [Full transcript of "Face the Nation with Margaret Brennan," March 23, 2025 - CBS News](#)

⁸ [U.S. launches multiple strikes against Houthi targets as Trump says attacks on American vessels "must stop" - CBS News](#)

⁹ [Trump holds Iran responsible for attacks by Houthi](#)

¹⁰ [Reuters: U.S. vows to keep hitting Houthis](#)

¹¹ [Reuters: Trump launches large-scale strikes](#)

¹² [UPDATED: Houthis Attempt Attack on Carrier Harry S. Truman After U.S. Strikes in Yemen - USNI News](#)

¹³ [BBC: U.S. launches wave of air strikes](#)

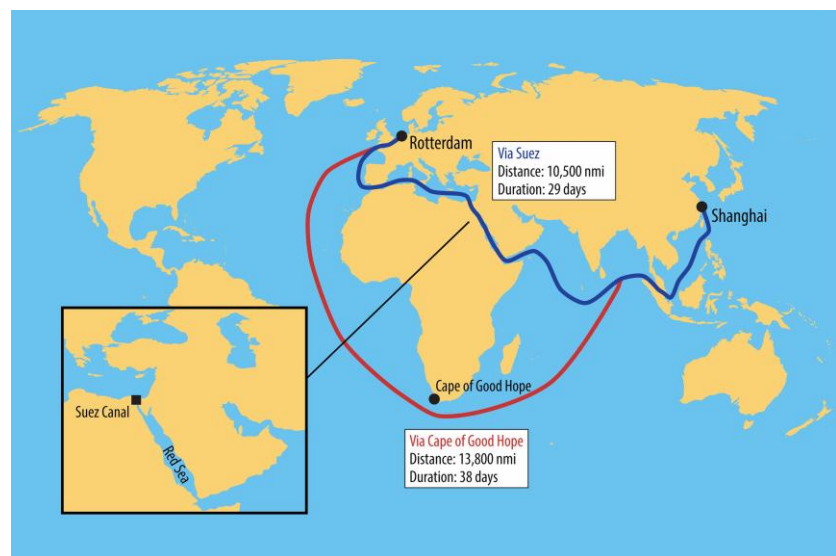
¹⁴ [Reuters: Trump launches large-scale strikes](#)

The strikes targeted critical infrastructure, potentially degrading the Houthis' ability to launch drones and missiles, with at least one senior commander reportedly hit.¹⁵ According to National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, the strikes have “taken out key Houthi leadership including their head missileer. We have hit their headquarters. We have hit communications nodes, weapons factories, and even some of their over-the-water drone production facilities just in the last couple of days.”¹⁶ The Houthis have continued attacks on both U.S. warships and Israel, vowing to maintain Red Sea operations until Israel lifts the Gaza blockade.¹⁷ Their history of rebuilding capabilities suggests the long-term impact may be limited unless the U.S. sustains its campaign.¹⁸ Ground forces aligned with the Yemeni government are limited in their ability to capitalize on the situation due to their fragmentation.

Previous Houthi Attacks on U.S. Ships and Disruption of Global Shipping Lanes

Secretary of State Marco Rubio has stated that over the last 18 months, the Houthis have attacked 174 Naval vessels of the United States along with 145 attacks on global shipping, noting that military operations would continue until the Houthis “no longer have the capability to do that.”¹⁹ The Houthis’ maritime campaign has severely disrupted global shipping, particularly through the Red Sea, a vital artery handling approximately 12-15% of world trade and 20% of global container traffic via the Suez Canal.²⁰ Due to these attacks, major shipping companies like Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd have rerouted vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, adding significant 3500 nautical miles and at least 10 days of travel time to Asia-Europe journeys, leading to increased costs, delays, and potential global inflation.²¹ *The Economist* estimates that shipments through the Red Sea are down by 70%.²²

The Red Sea is a crucial route for global trade, facilitating 7.8 million barrels per day of crude oil and fuel, and significant LNG shipments,



Creator: Dimitrios Karamitros | Credit: Getty Images

¹⁵ [The New York Times: Trump Orders U.S. Strikes](#)

¹⁶ [Full transcript of "Face the Nation with Margaret Brennan," March 23, 2025 - CBS News](#)

¹⁷ [Sirens blare in Tel Aviv as Houthi missiles intercepted in city's third attack this week](#)

¹⁸ [Al Jazeera: Mapping U.S. attacks](#)

¹⁹ [Secretary of State Marco Rubio says airstrikes on Iran-backed Houthis are "doing the world a favor" - CBS News](#)

²⁰ [Map Shows How Houthis Threaten Vital Global Shipping - Newsweek](#)

²¹ [The Siege of the Red Sea | Council on Foreign Relations](#)

²² Ibid.

but attacks by the Houthis have led major companies like BP and Shell to halt transits.²³ Due to Houthi attacks, oil trade flows through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (a strait between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa) have averaged 4 million barrels per day in 2024 compared to 8.7 million barrels a day in 2023.²⁴

In addition, since November 2023, Houthi attacks on U.S. ships have escalated significantly, which the Houthis state is in response to Israeli military operations in Gaza. The Houthis have also launched numerous attacks directly on Israel, including using hypersonic missiles, and Israel has responded by launching strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen.²⁵

In December 2023, former Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced the formation of Operation Prosperity Guardian an international maritime security force aimed at ending the blockade which included the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, and Spain.²⁶

The Houthis employ Iranian-supplied anti-ship cruise missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles, and drones in their attack on U.S. vessels. Civilian vessels can take measures to prevent boardings but remain defenseless against anti-ship missiles, whereas U.S. and allied military ships, despite advanced technology, are hindered by limited interceptor missile stocks and resupply challenges.²⁷ In addition, Russia provides targeting support to Houthi attacks on commercial shipping, with Iran brokering anti-ship missiles to the Houthis.²⁸

Timeline of significant Houthi attacks on U.S. ships prior to March 15th

On January 9, 2024, U.S. and British naval forces intercepted 21 Houthi drones and missiles targeting American ships in the Red Sea, an assault the Houthis claimed was retaliation for U.S. actions sinking three of their boats on December 31, 2023, killing 10 fighters.²⁹ In response, the Biden administration, on January 12, 2024, along with the United Kingdom, and nonoperational support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands conducted defensive strikes against Houthi targets including missile, radar, and unmanned aerial vehicle capabilities used to carry out attacks against vessels operating in international waters.³⁰

Two days after the Biden administration's strikes, the Houthis fired an anti-ship cruise missile at the USS Laboon, a U.S. destroyer in the Red Sea. The missile was shot down by a U.S. fighter

²³ [Shell suspends all Red Sea shipments - WSJ | Reuters](#)

²⁴ [Fewer tankers transit the Red Sea in 2024 - U.S. Energy Information Administration \(EIA\)](#)

²⁵ [Israel strikes Houthi targets in Yemen, killing at least four people | Reuters](#)

²⁶ [Statement from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea > U.S. Department of Defense > Release](#)

²⁷ [Houthi anti-ship missile systems: getting better all the time](#)

²⁸ [Russia Provides Targeting Support to Houthi Attacks on Commercial Shipping](#)

²⁹ [US, UK forces repel 'largest attack' by Houthis in Red Sea | Reuters](#)

³⁰ [US, Partners' Forces Strike Houthi Military Targets in Yemen > U.S. Department of Defense > Defense Department News](#)

jet, with no damage reported.³¹ On January 23, 2024, the Houthis launched three anti-ship ballistic missiles at the USS Gravelly (DDG-107), escorting the U.S.-flagged M/V Maersk Detroit and M/V Maersk Chesapeake in the Gulf of Aden. Two were shot down by the USS Gravelly; the third landed in the water.³²

On September 27-28, 2024, Houthis attacked USS Spruance (DDG-111), USS Stockdale (DDG-106), and USS Indianapolis (LCS-17) with eight drones, five anti-ship ballistic missiles, and three cruise missiles in the Bab el-Mandab Strait.³³ On November 12, 2024, Houthis launched at least eight one-way uncrewed aerial systems, five anti-ship ballistic missiles, and three anti-ship cruise missiles at USS Spruance (DDG-111) and USS Stockdale (DDG-106), which engaged all the projectiles leading to no injuries or damages.³⁴ On December 9, 2024, the Houthis launched weapons at the USS Stockdale (DDG-106) and USS O’Kane (DDG-77) when they were escorting three U.S. owned, operated, and flagged merchant vessels.³⁵

| Date | Event |
|-----------------------|--|
| January 9, 2024 | U.S. and British naval forces intercept 21 Houthi drones and missiles targeting American ships in the Red Sea. |
| January 12, 2024 | U.S., UK, and allies conduct defensive strikes on Houthi targets. |
| January 14, 2024 | Houthis fire an anti-ship cruise missile at USS <i>Laboon</i> , which is shot down by a U.S. fighter jet. |
| January 23, 2024 | Houthis launch three anti-ship ballistic missiles at USS <i>Gravelly</i> escorting merchant vessels. Two are intercepted; the third lands in the water. |
| September 27-28, 2024 | Houthis attack USS <i>Spruance</i> , <i>Stockdale</i> , and <i>Indianapolis</i> with eight drones, five anti-ship ballistic missiles, and three cruise missiles in the Bab el-Mandab Strait. |
| November 12, 2024 | Houthis launch at least eight one-way drones, five anti-ship ballistic missiles, and three cruise missiles at USS <i>Spruance</i> and USS <i>Stockdale</i> . All intercepted; no damage. |
| December 9, 2024 | Houthis attack USS <i>Stockdale</i> and USS <i>O’Kane</i> while escorting three U.S.-flagged merchant vessels. |

Background on Iranian Backed Houthi Terrorists

The Houthis are an Iranian backed terrorist organization in Yemen which controls approximately one-third of Yemen’s territory and more than two-thirds of the country’s population. The Houthi movement is made up largely of Zaydi Shia Muslims, with their namesake leadership being drawn largely from the Houthi tribe which hails from northern Yemen on the border of Saudi Arabia. In September 2014, the Houthis launched an armed uprising which resulted in them taking control of Yemen’s capital city of Sanaa from the Yemeni government. In response, Saudi

³¹ [Yemen Houthi rebels fire missile at U.S. warship in Red Sea in first attack after American-led strikes | Courthouse News Service](#)

³² [Houthis Attack Commercial Shipping Vessel with Anti-Ship Missiles > U.S. Central Command > Press Release View](#)

³³ [U.S. Warships Fire a Dozen Interceptors Against Iranian Missile Attack - USNI News](#)

³⁴ [Houthis Attack Two U.S. Destroyers Leaving the Red Sea, Pentagon Says - USNI News](#)

³⁵ [USS Stockdale, USS O’Kane Shoot Down Houthi Weapons While Escorting U.S. Merchant Ships, Says CENTCOM - USNI News](#)

Arabia launched a military intervention in March 2014, along with Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan, to restore the internationally recognized government.

The United States provided targeting, intelligence, and logistical support to the Saudi-backed campaign at the beginning of the war. However, in October 2018, the Trump administration announced it was time for the conflict to end and called on Yemenis to immediately enter peace negotiations. In November 2018, the Trump administration announced it would no longer refuel coalition aircraft operating over Yemen.³⁶ Since 2019, a peace process between the Houthis and the Yemeni government, sponsored by the United Nations and backed by Saudi Arabia, has made little progress except for limited ceasefires. The Houthis, capitalizing on the economic fragility and military disunity of the internationally recognized Yemeni government, have continued to expand ground operations including ramping up attacks in Ma'rib Governorate, Yemen's primary gas-producing region which hosts one of the country's largest oilfields in the al-Wadi district.³⁷ Controlling these resources would give the Houthis access to significant revenue streams, crucial for sustaining their war effort.³⁸

³⁶ [U.S. halting refueling of Saudi-led coalition aircraft in Yemen's war | Reuters](#)

³⁷ [Houthis ramp up domestic attacks in Marib](#)

³⁸ [20210726_acaps_yemen_analysis_hub_marib_scenario.pdf](#)