

Assessing the U.S. Military Campaign Against the Houthis

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Brief Analysis

Experts discuss how the new campaign differs from previous U.S. strikes in Yemen, what targets are being hit, and whether it can resolve the threat without broader American policy efforts.

On March 25, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Elizabeth Dent, Michael Knights, and Noam Raydan. Dent is a senior fellow at the Institute and former director for the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula at the Pentagon. Knights is the Institute's Bernstein Senior Fellow and co-creator

of its *Militia Spotlight* platform (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight>). Raydan is a senior fellow at the Institute and co-creator of its *Maritime Spotlight* (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/maritime-spotlight>) platform. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Elizabeth Dent

Like the Biden administration before it, the Trump administration views the Houthi threat as a strategic priority, but there are stark differences in their approaches to countering the challenge. President Biden was committed to using multilateral diplomacy to preserve freedom of navigation, as shown when his administration convened international partners in the defensive coalition Operation Prosperity Guardian and worked with the UN to disrupt Houthi supply lines. Following Houthi attacks on U.S. and British warships in January 2024, the two allies launched joint strikes on Houthi positions while other partners provided non-operational support. Biden's team continued to look for additional ways to degrade Houthi capabilities more effectively—plans that they provided to the Trump team.

Two days into his new term, President Trump issued an executive order re-designating the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Subsequent weeks saw the group resume attacks (including against U.S. military assets) in response to developments in Gaza. On March 15, the president announced the launch of a new campaign against the Houthis—the result of over a year of refocused efforts by the military and intelligence community. The new campaign differed from previous strikes in three key ways: (1) expanded scope and geographic spread of targets, (2) greater sustainment, and (3) delegation of authority to the head of U.S. Central Command to control the timing and tempo of the strikes. Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth **ordered another carrier group** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-carriers-middle-east-implications-houthis-iran-and-us-force-readiness>) into the region and sent additional assets to the U.S. base at Diego Garcia, likely to ensure that the Yemen campaign can be sustained.

It is too early to assess the campaign's success, though the rate and scope of the strikes so far raise concerns about America's overall force readiness and munitions stockpiles. To effectively neutralize the Houthi threat, Washington will need to organize contributions from partners and complement the air campaign with increased interdiction of vessels that attempt to resupply the group.

Michael Knights

The new campaign comes almost a decade after Saudi Arabia launched its intervention in Yemen, and the United States now finds itself repeating the Saudi task of identifying and striking Houthi targets, albeit with a unique focus on the maritime threat. The ultimate goal of curbing this threat could have been achieved ten years ago with increased U.S. involvement in the Gulf intervention, especially considering that Houthi attacks on shipping began as early as 2019.

The current operation has four main target categories:

1. **Leadership targets:** U.S. forces hit top Houthi military figures early on, eliminating fifteen flag officers (colonels, majors, etc.). Mid-level technicians have been successfully targeted as well. Yet the operation has yet to eliminate Houthi national leadership, indicating the group's superior operational security compared with other "axis of resistance" groups like Hezbollah.
2. **Targets in Saada:** The Houthi home province and capital have seen strikes against underground weapons manufacturing facilities. The current targeting of Saada is far more precise than during the Saudi operation (e.g., in May 2015, Saudi forces destroyed 1,200 residential complexes in the province as collective punishment).
3. **Coastal targets:** Mobile radars, advanced conventional weapons storage, and other coastal assets have been struck, reducing the Houthis' ability to threaten shipping. Ultimately, breaking the group's access to the Red Sea coastline is the campaign's most critical focus.
4. **Peripheral targets:** Outlying areas in territory nominally controlled by Yemen's internationally recognized government have been targeted in cases where Houthi supervisors, junior commanders, and air defense systems have been found there.

If the operation is maintained—and, crucially, if it is coupled with increased interdiction of rearmament efforts from Iran and increased pressure on Tehran to cease backing the Houthis—it will eventually diminish the group's strike capability. Yet coercing the Houthis into publicly stating that they will cease attacks is nearly impossible given their resilience against Western-backed military might over the past two decades. As U.S. pressure mounts, the group will likely target Saudi Arabia in retaliation, leveraging an American strategic vulnerability in the region. In that scenario, Washington will need to show that it can protect the kingdom as well as it has defended Israel—a feat that would amount to a major strategic victory.

Noam Raydan

Since the Houthis intensified their antishipping campaign in 2023 in response to the Gaza war, they have conducted over 100 attacks on warships and commercial vessels, deploying an arsenal that includes aerial drones, ballistic and cruise missiles, and unmanned surface vehicles. In January, the Gaza ceasefire led them to claim a halt on attacks against "non-Israeli" ships. Yet data from The Washington Institute's **attack tracker** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019>) (which monitors all Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and nearby waterways) suggests that the group does not accurately distinguish between ships on a consistent basis, in several cases striking vessels with no clear links to Israel, the United States, or the United Kingdom.

As a result, international transit through the Bab al-Mandab Strait has been at an all-time low since 2023. Even during the announced halt in attacks earlier this year, few ship owners and operators attempted to voyage through the strait. More oil tankers transited the chokepoint during this lull, with

some reportedly able to take advantage of lower insurance rates and transport jet fuel and diesel from India to Europe. Yet shipping giants like Maersk and MSC have not returned.

Indeed, the Houthi crisis continues to create considerable economic challenges in Europe. Data from Kpler indicates that oil deliveries to the continent originating from Iraq's Basra terminal have been sent via the Cape of Good Hope instead of the Red Sea due to concerns about potential attacks. This longer route has effectively increased the price of oil bound for Europe by nearly \$2 per barrel. In February 2024, the European Union launched the ongoing Operation Aspides to help restore freedom of navigation by escorting ships through the Red Sea.

Most of the vessels still using the Bab al-Mandab route are Russian- and Chinese-linked commercial ships. Last year, media reports indicated that Beijing and Moscow reached an agreement with the Houthis for safe passage, and vessels have been observed transmitting messages on their automatic identification systems to highlight that their crew and/or cargo are from these countries. Moreover, Russian crude flows bound for India have not dropped during the Houthi campaign.

In Saudi Arabia, oil flows remain largely unaffected, in part because the kingdom's East-West Pipeline runs to Red Sea ports, allowing it to export crude to Europe without transiting the Bab al-Mandab. Yet Riyadh's ambitious economic projects are more dependent on maritime security for continued progress, so they may face uncertainty if the Houthi threat continues.

The crisis has also greatly affected Egypt, which financially relies on toll revenue from ships transiting the Suez Canal. The rate of such transits has dropped by over 50 percent during the Houthi campaign. Moreover, Cairo's energy bill is currently inflated because the country is struggling with domestic oil production and has been importing liquefied natural gas to meet the shortfall—all of which makes the lost toll revenue a threat to Egypt's economic sustainability.

If the Houthis continue to grow their military arsenal with support from Iran, the consequences could be damaging for a host of U.S., Saudi, and allied interests. Besides essentially determining freedom of navigation in the Bab al-Mandab, the group could be emboldened to exert leverage beyond the context of the Gaza war.

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