

# Two Carriers in the Middle East: Implications for the Houthis, Iran, and U.S. Force Readiness

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**The decision to order an additional carrier strike group to the region comes amid the Trump administration’s new campaign against the Houthis and public warnings to Iran, though it could affect U.S. force readiness worldwide.**

Last week, reports (<https://apnews.com/article/pentagon-warships-middle-east-carrier-increase-0801c2c12cac065eefa06bd73667fd69>) emerged that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth had extended the USS *Harry S. Truman* in the Middle East for an additional month while simultaneously ordering the USS *Carl Vinson* to head to the region. The decision to have two carrier strike groups in the Middle East at the same time comes amid the March 15 [announcement \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/03/president-trump-is-standing-up-to-terrorism-and-protecting-international-commerce/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/03/president-trump-is-standing-up-to-terrorism-and-protecting-international-commerce/) of renewed military strikes against the Houthis—the Iran-backed Yemeni group that the Trump administration recently [re-designated \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/01/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-re-designates-the-houthis-as-a-foreign-terrorist-organization/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/01/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-re-designates-the-houthis-as-a-foreign-terrorist-organization/) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

The campaign’s stated goal is to restore freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. Despite his [oft-repeated pledge \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/trumps-yemen-campaign-tests-promise-to-avoid-forever-wars-43e8054d\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/trumps-yemen-campaign-tests-promise-to-avoid-forever-wars-43e8054d) to end “forever wars” in the Middle East, President Trump has [made clear \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-launches-strikes-against-yemens-houthis-warns-iran-2025-03-15/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-launches-strikes-against-yemens-houthis-warns-iran-2025-03-15/) that the United States will not tolerate the Houthi threat to global commercial shipping and American naval vessels in local waterways. He [also warned \(https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyd2l17ygpo\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyd2l17ygpo) that Washington would hold Iran accountable for “every shot fired by the Houthis.”

The group has not attacked a commercial vessel transiting the Red Sea since January, adhering to its public pledge about honoring the Hamas-Israel cease-fire. On February 19, however, the Houthis [launched](#)

[\(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemens-houthis-launched-missile-us-fighter-jet-missed-2025-02-22/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemens-houthis-launched-missile-us-fighter-jet-missed-2025-02-22/) several surface-to-air missiles at a U.S. F-16 fighter jet and MQ-9 Reaper drone, avowedly in response to Trump’s proposal about relocating Palestinians from Gaza. On March 5, the U.S. government **acknowledged**  [\(https://english.alarabiya.net/News/united-states/2025/03/05/us-says-it-lost-contact-with-mq-9-near-yemen-after-houthis-claim-to-have-shot-it-down\)](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) that it had lost contact with another MQ-9, which the Houthis later claimed to have shot down near the port city of Hodeida. The group **also declared**  [\(https://apnews.com/article/yemen-houthi-rebels-israel-hamas-war-gaza-aid-ship-attacks-0da6c2453fe2c4e5f81923c84c7d3f3a\)](https://apnews.com/article/yemen-houthi-rebels-israel-hamas-war-gaza-aid-ship-attacks-0da6c2453fe2c4e5f81923c84c7d3f3a) earlier this month that it would renew attacks on Israeli-linked vessels in response to the aid blockade in Gaza and faltering talks on phase two of the ceasefire. (For comprehensive information on Houthi incidents before and during the Gaza war, see The Washington Institute’s **Maritime Attack Tracker**  [\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019).)

After years of rightsizing the U.S. posture and decreasing naval commitments in the Middle East, Washington has now doubled its carrier presence in the region twice in the past six months. Last fall, the Biden administration increased U.S. naval deployments there to support Israel against Iranian missile threats and keep a lid on wider regional escalation. The Trump administration’s current deployment appears directly tied to the renewed campaign against the Houthis and the president’s warnings to Iran. Additionally, **unconfirmed reports**  [\(https://www.newsweek.com/us-military-iran-yemen-nuclear-indian-diego-garcia-2050658\)](https://www.newsweek.com/us-military-iran-yemen-nuclear-indian-diego-garcia-2050658) indicate a significant U.S. buildup of B-2 stealth bombers, C-17 transport aircraft, and KC-135 refueling tankers at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean—another development that could suggest the administration is posturing for sustained, decisive air operations against the Houthis and/or contingency planning in case tensions escalate with Iran.

As with every military posture adjustment, maintaining two carriers in the Middle East has both drawbacks and benefits. The *Truman* and *Vinson* strike groups each include a flagship aircraft carrier, a carrier air wing with several squadrons, a destroyer squadron, and a guided-missile cruiser. Together, they will provide a range of formidable capabilities for continuing the Houthi campaign and deterring Iran, including firepower for long- and short-range strikes, intelligence and surveillance, and defense systems against air, sea, and subsea attacks. The extra firepower is especially important because the United States is entering the third week of what officials have **described**  [\(https://www.politico.com/news/2025/03/18/us-houthi-endless-war-risk-00236679/\)](https://www.politico.com/news/2025/03/18/us-houthi-endless-war-risk-00236679/) as an “unrelenting” campaign that will continue **until**  [\(https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4122757/us-punches-back-at-iran-backed-houthi-terrorists-in-yemen/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4122757/us-punches-back-at-iran-backed-houthi-terrorists-in-yemen/) “the Houthis pledge to stop attacking our ships and putting American lives at risk.”

Of course, any expanded deployment has second- and third-order effects on America’s global footprint. Each time a carrier deployment is extended or amended during a conflict, critical maintenance, training schedules, and rest must be delayed to accommodate the shift. These delays affect onward deployments in other priority arenas and, by extension, U.S. military readiness for other missions, including the Trump administration’s major priority of **deterring China**  [\(https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4123253/chief-pentagon-spokesman-sean-pannell-holds-press-briefing/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4123253/chief-pentagon-spokesman-sean-pannell-holds-press-briefing/). Extended deployments also increase the risk to service members, which can have detrimental effects on morale.

Although the *Truman* strike group’s presence has only been extended by one month for now, the Pentagon **noted**  [\(https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4122357/hegseth-says-campaign-against-houthis-will-be-unrelenting-until-hostilities-cease/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4122357/hegseth-says-campaign-against-houthis-will-be-unrelenting-until-hostilities-cease/) that it will continue the Yemen campaign at the president’s direction until the Houthis stop attacking American vessels transiting the Red Sea. In addition to protecting U.S. assets, the Pentagon has **underscored**  [\(https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4123253/chief-pentagon-spokesman-sean-pannell-holds-press-briefing/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4123253/chief-pentagon-spokesman-sean-pannell-holds-press-briefing/)

**parnell-holds-press-briefing/)** the campaign’s wider purpose: to degrade Houthi capabilities and “open up shipping lanes in the region.” The need to maintain two carrier groups in the Middle East may therefore persist beyond the near future, despite the concerns about force readiness and other issues. Secretary Hegseth and his team will have to balance these needs and concerns even as the administration pursues its priorities of implementing an “America First” posture, addressing the threat from China, and maintaining American superiority in the Indo-Pacific.

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