

Is the Houthi Threat a Checkmate for U.S. Military Logistics?

by [James E. Shepard \(/experts/james-e-shepard\)](/experts/james-e-shepard)

Apr 21, 2025

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[James E. Shepard \(/experts/james-e-shepard\)](/experts/james-e-shepard)

James E. Shepard, a lieutenant colonel in the United States Air Force, is a 2024-2025 Military Fellow at The Washington Institute.

 Brief Analysis

The Iran-backed militia's disruption of Red Sea shipping is threatening America's ability to rapidly deploy and supply its forces in the Middle East and beyond, but a combination of logistical workarounds, military measures, and diplomatic efforts may be the answer.

On March 15, President Trump launched an ongoing military campaign against the Houthi militia in Yemen, targeting senior officials, command centers, weapons depots, and infrastructure across the country. The administration's goal is to restore freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait, where the Iran-backed Houthis conducted sporadic attacks for years before [escalating their targeting](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/curbing-houthi-attacks-civilian-ships-bab-al-mandab) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/curbing-houthi-attacks-civilian-ships-bab-al-mandab>) of commercial and military vessels when the Gaza war began in 2023.

This waterway's crucial role in global trade is well known—it facilitates the transfer of [\\$1 trillion in goods](https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/02/red-sea-attacks-trade-experts-houthi-shipping-yemen/#:~:text=Important%20as%20it%20is%2C%20just,flows%20through%20the%20Red%20Sea.) (<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/02/red-sea-attacks-trade-experts-houthi-shipping-yemen/#:~:text=Important%20as%20it%20is%2C%20just,flows%20through%20the%20Red%20Sea.>) annually, along with 30 percent of the world's container traffic. Yet it also serves as a key transit route for commercially shipped military logistics, enabling swift and efficient deployment of U.S. forces and resources across multiple theaters of operation. By disrupting both of these roles, Houthi attacks represent a direct challenge to what the United States has defined as “[a core national interest](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/27/world/middleeast/houthis-yemen-us-strikes-reality.html)” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/27/world/middleeast/houthis-yemen-us-strikes-reality.html>).

A Strategic Challenge

The emergence of this threat stems from Iran's broader strategy of empowering its proxies to deny adversaries freedom of maneuver in the region. The massive U.S. and coalition buildups for the 1991 and 2003 campaigns in Iraq involved the use of ports throughout the Persian Gulf. In response, Iran developed a layered [antiaccess/area-](#)

denial (A2AD) (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/emerging-anti-access-area-denial-challenge>) strategy that used proxy militias, long-range strike systems, surface-to-air missiles, and unconventional forces to threaten access to the Gulf.

In Yemen, Tehran's support and guidance have enabled the Houthis to threaten Red Sea traffic and key Saudi ports such as Jeddah and King Abdullah Economic City, advancing the Iranian goal of blocking alternative logistical routes while serving Houthi interests as well. The group's tactics—which include precision strikes with drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles—are widely attributed (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/heir-and-spare-how-yemens-southern-hezbollah-could-change-irans-deterrent-calculus>) to Iranian training, equipment, and other support.

In response to this threat, allied military vessels have continued to traverse the Bab al-Mandab, but many commercial shipping firms have been forced to take the more financially and environmentally costly route around the Cape of Good Hope. As such, Houthi capabilities are impeding the speed that is so crucial to military logistics, raising the question of whether the group has effectively “checkmated” Washington and its partners in the Red Sea. To sustain joint combat operations in wartime, the United States relies on commercial shipping to move **up to 80 percent** (<https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/why-the-u-s-military-has-to-hitch-a-ride-on-commercial-ships-58d0ece9>) of defense materiel. Beyond the military's own sealift capabilities, the Defense Department can access privately owned vessels during crises through the **Voluntary Intermodal Sealift Agreement** (<https://www.maritime.dot.gov/national-security/strategic-sealift/voluntary-intermodal-sealift-agreement-visa>), thereby enhancing its flexibility, cutting costs, and ensuring rapid deployment to distant theaters.

This heavy reliance on commercial shipping requires secure supply lines for the unimpeded movement of military logistics during contingency operations. Yet given the U.S. Navy's finite resources and widespread commitments, not every unarmed shipment can be protected with an escort. Moreover, even escorted ships **have occasionally been attacked** (<https://x.com/CENTCOM/status/1750205198067237095>) in the Red Sea, albeit unsuccessfully. A persistent Houthi maritime threat would therefore have **serious implications** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/despite-houthi-pledge-limit-attacks-red-sea-remains-highly-volatile>) for any contingency operations in which logistics are mission-critical.

To illustrate: if an oil shipment from the Arabian Sea to Rotterdam took the alternative Cape of Good Hope route, it would need an estimated fifteen extra days and up to \$1 million in additional fuel, so logistical shipments in the opposite direction could be expected to suffer similar delays (see graphic). Even if commercial carriers were willing to risk avoiding this delay by transiting the Red Sea, war risk insurance could raise costs by **nearly 1 percent of hull value** (<https://www.tradewindsnews.com/tankers/indian-tanker-trips-on-the-rise-to-europe-via-suez-as-insurance-costs-halve/2-1-1792645>).



(/sites/default/files/2025-

04/yemen-

houthi-

shipping-

africa-

route-

Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration (<https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=61363>)

EIA-

map.JPG)

For the United States and its allies, the increased transit time around Africa would make this option impractical for scenarios requiring the rapid, secure movement of military resources across vast operational theaters. The global

nature of great power competition requires the Pentagon to shift assets between the European, Central, and Indo-Pacific theaters even under normal circumstances, and using the Bab al-Mandab would be mandatory whenever such shifts become urgent.

Notably, sealift is the most cost-effective mode of transportation available for military logistics. Airlift is more expensive and in even greater demand, but the Pentagon will continue using it for immediate strategic repositioning of high-value capabilities. The next section explores how the military might make greater use of a third mode of transport: overland.

An Overland Alternative?

Given their drone and missile capabilities, the Houthis can target cargo ships throughout the Red Sea, much of the Arabian Sea, and the northern Indian Ocean, though hitting moving vessels

[\(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemens-houthis-target-us-ship-pinocchio-red-sea-2024-03-12/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemens-houthis-target-us-ship-pinocchio-red-sea-2024-03-12/)

at long range is challenging. Ships are most vulnerable while off-loading cargo in port. Yet once said cargo is transferred to trucks, aircraft, or other vehicles for intra-theater transport, interdiction opportunities diminish.

Accordingly, using a variety of transport routes in addition to the Bab al-Mandab could help mitigate the Houthi threat. The Defense Department's Trans Arabian Network

[\(https://www.army.mil/article/165080/developing_the_trans_arabian_network\)](https://www.army.mil/article/165080/developing_the_trans_arabian_network) (TAN) proposes 300 logistics nodes—airfields, seaports, and ground hubs—across the Arabian Peninsula to diversify shipping options. For example, some ships could bypass the strait and dock at Jeddah; their cargo could then move onward by air or land. As noted previously, Jeddah is well within range of Houthi fire, but introducing this and other alternative routes would create targeting dilemmas for the group and provide for more flexible U.S. decisionmaking aimed at boosting overall safety and resilience.

The TAN has been tested but is not fully operational. Proof-of-principle trials conducted by U.S. Central Command since 2015 have shown promise, but customs delays persist due to inconsistent regulations, and the prerequisites for advance customs clearance tend to hamper efficiency. Theoretically, the TAN could handle thousands of tons daily if it were fully activated and all customs agreements were in place, potentially rivaling the daily trade volume of the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. For now, however, it remains constrained by contractor issues, military cargo limits, poor multimodal integration, and incomplete streamlining efforts.

Another option is the UAE-Israel land corridor, a trade route that runs from Israel's Haifa port through Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, reaching the Persian Gulf by avoiding the Red Sea entirely. Two transport companies—the Israeli firm Trucknet and the Emirati firm PureTrans—already operate [\(https://www.newarab.com/analysis/will-uae-israel-land-corridor-replace-red-sea-routes\)](https://www.newarab.com/analysis/will-uae-israel-land-corridor-replace-red-sea-routes) along the route and may be prime candidates for contracting by the U.S. military. The corridor is currently equipped to handle up to 350 trucks per day [\(https://www.jns.org/uae-israel-land-corridor-expanding-to-egypt/\)](https://www.jns.org/uae-israel-land-corridor-expanding-to-egypt/), rivaling or even exceeding a fully operational TAN.

Whatever options Washington chooses, flexible, resilient alternatives will be necessary as long as maritime shipping is under threat. With further exploration and proper security measures such as increased air defenses at the offload ports, both the TAN and the UAE-Israel corridor could fulfill those requirements, meet the military's transport demands in the Middle East theater, and perhaps even decrease delivery times to locations in Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

Policy Recommendations

To maintain logistical access to the region, Washington and its military partners should pursue a twofold approach centered on (1) meeting immediate needs through expedient workarounds and pressure on the Houthis, and (2)

seeking long-term answers through a viable strategy to neutralize the threat. The following recommendations address both needs:

- **Maintain pressure.** The Houthis must be rendered unwilling or unable to threaten shipping. This entails escalating the current campaign beyond U.S. airstrikes. A credible threat by Yemeni ground forces is required, in coordination with credible partners like the Saudis or Emiratis. The Presidential Leadership Council, a Yemeni government entity recognized by the UN, should be backed to exploit the opportunity created by U.S. airstrikes.
- **Shift focus upstream.** The Trump administration should seek to deter Iran—the Houthis’ primary backer—by showcasing CENTCOM’s recent bolstering (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/satellite-images-show-multiple-us-2-nuclear-capable/story?id=120431730>) of capabilities in the region. The forward deployment of B-2 bombers and the entrance of another aircraft carrier (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-carriers-middle-east-implications-houthis-iran-and-us-force-readiness>) present a serious dilemma to both adversaries—one that should be highlighted in the current nuclear negotiations with Tehran. For example, U.S. officials could demand that Iran halt all military support for the Houthis as one of the preconditions for receiving sanctions relief.
- **Expand security cooperation.** Washington should accelerate diplomatic efforts to mobilize a willing coalition of countries who would benefit from a secure Red Sea, including regional partners Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The European Union’s ongoing—albeit under-resourced (<https://europeantimes.news/2025/02/red-sea-council-prolongs-the-mandate-of-operation-aspidess/>)—naval task force Aspides is a good starting point to enable defensive burden-sharing with U.S. forces.
- **Explore alternative routes.** While securing the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab should remain the primary U.S. objective, the administration should also expedite efforts to build flexibility into theater logistics and develop rapid, cost-effective land-based alternatives like the TAN and/or the UAE-Israel land corridor.

Through these and other measures, the United States can establish the comprehensive strategy necessary for the longer-term mission of addressing the Houthi and Iranian threats to military logistics and global trade once and for all.

Lt. Col. James Shepard (USAF) is a 2024-25 military fellow at The Washington Institute and former senior executive officer to the Air Force director of staff at the Pentagon. The views expressed in this article represent the personal views of the author and are not necessarily the views of the Department of Defense, the Department of the Air Force, or Air University. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Settler Violence Is Turning the West Bank Into a Tinderbox

Apr 18, 2025



Neomi Neumann

(/policy-analysis/settler-violence-turning-west-bank-tinderbox)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Kataib Hezbollah Chief Urges Ongoing Caution Vis-a-Vis the U.S.

Apr 18, 2025



Crispin Smith,
Hamdi Malik

(/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-chief-urges-ongoing-caution-vis-vis-us)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Curbing China's Influence on the New Syrian Government

Apr 17, 2025



Grant Rumley,
Aaron Y. Zelin

(/policy-analysis/curbing-chinas-influence-new-syrian-government)

TOPICS

Energy & Economics (/policy-analysis/energy-economics)

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)