

The Houthis Join the War

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Brief Analysis

Why did the group strike now, what might they do next, and how could it affect the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran?

Following a month of saber rattling, the Houthis entered the Iran war on March 28 by firing missiles at southern Israel (none of which hit their targets). The move was apparently linked to the conflict's recent escalatory trajectory. The day before the strike, Houthi spokesman Yahya Saree laid out for the first time what conditions would **trigger military action** (<https://x.com/bashareport/status/2037633975665971417?s=43&t=2Inn-07ZAgx8ROBJ6v2yAQ>) by the group: (1) continued escalation against Iran and the "axis of jihad and resistance," (2) additional alliances joining the fight on the side of the United States and Israel (likely implying the Arab Gulf states), and (3) the Red Sea being used to carry out hostile operations.

Following the strikes, Saree **explained** (https://x.com/yahya_saree/status/2037790794036219937?s=43&t=2Inn-07ZAgx8ROBJ6v2yAQ) the move as a response to continued U.S. and Israeli escalation, particularly the recent targeting of Iranian infrastructure. He noted that Houthi strikes would continue until "aggression against all fronts of the resistance ceases." Indeed, given President Trump's recent threats of heightened military action—whether aimed at destroying **Iran's critical infrastructure** (<https://apnews.com/article/iran-us-israel-trump-lebanon-march-30-2026-8abb0ee50be4cd8dd9ddde3a9d846ef8>) (e.g., electricity and desalination plants), capturing oil export facilities on Kharg Island with ground troops, reopening the Strait of Hormuz by force, and/or destroying Iran's remaining stockpiles of high-enriched uranium—the Houthis are signaling that Tehran's axis has escalatory options too.

These options are significant. The Houthis' most important pressure point is the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The group has a **proven record** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/menamaritime/>) of strangling this critical Red Sea chokepoint, through which 12 percent of global maritime trade passed annually prior to 2024. During the Gaza war, the Houthis' Red Sea campaign forced shipping companies to divert cargo around the Cape of Good Hope, adding roughly two weeks of transit time. Neither a U.S.-led military mission (Operation Prosperity Guardian) nor a

European-led defensive effort (Operation Poseidon Archer) was able to restore commercial traffic. A fifty-two-day intensive U.S. military campaign (Operation Rough Rider) managed to halt Houthi attacks on U.S. vessels at a cost of over a **billion dollars** (<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/trump-operation-houthis-cost-1-billion-rcna205333>), but other attacks continued until last October's Gaza ceasefire.

By delaying their entry into the current war, the Houthis are in a position to maximize the pain they can inflict on the global economy. Iran's **partial closure** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-force-multiplier-tracking-wars-maritime-and-energy-effects>) of the Strait of Hormuz and attacks on Gulf energy infrastructure had already elevated energy costs, disrupted supply chains, and contributed to inflationary pressures worldwide. Closing the Bab al-Mandab would pile on economic pressure when markets can least afford it, further incentivizing the United States to end the conflict. The strait still carries approximately 5 percent of seaborne oil trade, and **analysts estimate** (<https://abcnews.com/International/options-dwindle-oil-middle-east-bab-el-mandeb/story?id=131546139#:~:text=In%202024%2C%20the%20Bab%20el,in%20Asia%2C%20per%20Kpler%20data.>) that

disrupting it could add \$20 per barrel to oil prices. Houthi attacks could also disrupt Saudi Arabia's wartime strategy of using the East-West Pipeline to bypass Hormuz and export more oil (approximately five million barrels per day) through the Red Sea port of Yanbu. The group could even decide to attack critical infrastructure inside Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates directly.

Notably, Houthi military actions so far have been carefully calibrated. Firing at Israel is the lowest rung on the escalatory ladder—it shows Houthi supporters and allies that the group has not abandoned the fight while likely avoiding drawing in the United States. It also avoids risking a potential understanding with Saudi Arabia to end Yemen's civil war on terms favorable to the Houthis—something the group **has been working on** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-seismic-shift-has-consequences-beyond-its-borders>) for years. The Houthis already calculated that Israel would eventually attack them again anyway, so striking now does not substantially raise their military risks—though it certainly invites Israel to speed up the timeline.

Now that the Houthis have entered the fray, however, the probability of them moving up the escalatory ladder is high, especially if the conflict continues expanding. This path holds significant risks for the group, including potential resumption of Yemen's frozen civil war if the Houthis' domestic adversaries see an opportunity to advance. Yet the group's leadership appears ready to take that risk, regardless of the additional hardship for Yemen's people.

April Longley Alley is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and former senior political advisor to the UN's Yemen envoy (2020-24). ❖

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