Washington Must Scrap Its "Groundhog Day" Approach in Yemen

by Elizabeth Dent **(/experts/elizabeth-dent)**

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Brief Analysis

The Houthis' rapid march on Yemen's Red Sea coast and punishing attacks on Saudi Arabia have opened another front in an expanding regional war, but U.S. officials are stuck in a time warp over how to respond.

After more than four years of relative calm, the Saudi-Houthi war is back, and more dangerous. The conflict originally grew out of the Houthis' 2014 seizure of Yemen's capital and expulsion of the internationally recognized government. After a Saudi-led coalition intervened in 2015 to restore the government and prevent the group from consolidating control, years of heavy combat followed. A 2022 truce sharply reduced cross-border attacks, but it did not resolve the conflict or dismantle the Houthis' military capabilities. Tensions increased in 2026, and fighting resumed after Saudi forces struck the runway at Sanaa airport on July 13 to block the return of an Iranian plane carrying a Houthi delegation. The group retaliated by blockading Saudi vessels in the Red Sea, striking the kingdom's civilian and energy infrastructure (including Riyadh airport), launching cross-border incursions, and capturing large swaths of Yemeni territory along the western coast.

Washington is responding with essentially the same defensive playbook it used a decade ago: providing the Saudis with air defense systems, intelligence, logistical assistance, military advice, and help on protecting critical infrastructure. Yet the threat is no longer the same—the Houthis are more capable and ambitious **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-truce-risk)**, Saudi defenses and stockpiles are under greater strain, and the conflict is now linked to a broader regional war with Iran.

The United States should of course continue helping Riyadh defend its territory and people. Yet it should not mistake its familiar package of military assistance for a strategy to resolve the Yemen conflict. U.S. interests in that conflict are now narrower: protecting American personnel and commercial shipping **(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/how-secure-straits)**, preventing attacks on Saudi civilians and critical

infrastructure, and removing Yemen as another major front in the war with Iran. Riyadh has asked Washington to conduct offensive strikes against Houthi targets, but the Trump administration has thus far **declined (https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/houthis-push-control-yemen-highlands-trump-reported-have-called-off-airstrikes-2026-09-21/)** . That restraint is justified—not because Saudi Arabia should be left to simply absorb attacks, but because such direct participation would expand the U.S. military commitment without addressing the political disputes that sustain the conflict. Another round of American strikes would also be insufficient to eliminate the Houthis' dispersed missile and drone arsenal. Washington should therefore separate robust defensive assistance from support for an open-ended offensive campaign, using a combination of diplomacy and targeted pressure to bring the parties back to the negotiating table.

A Policy on Autopilot

As noted above, U.S. support to the Saudis since 2015 has included training and advisory programs, air and missile defense, intelligence and targeting assistance, maintenance help, and efforts to reduce civilian harm. These efforts were facilitated by sales of missile defense systems, radars, aircraft, munitions, and maintenance. With more than $129 billion in active defense contracts, Saudi Arabia remains one of the largest **recipients (https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-saudi-arabia)** of U.S. defense equipment via the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) programs. In addition, the U.S. military deployed some of its own air defense batteries, aircraft, naval forces, and personnel to the kingdom from 2015 to 2021. Certain types of direct operational support were later reduced or ended, including aerial refueling for coalition operations in 2018 and other U.S. deployments after 2021. Yet military assistance did not end, even as Washington placed greater emphasis on diplomacy.

Notably, U.S. contributions were not just defensive. Washington also **provided (https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Votel_03-09-17.pdf)** the coalition with intelligence, satellite imagery, and targeting information on Houthi military movements, Houthi launch sites, and Iranian weapons transfers and resupply networks, among other assets. Such support was intended in part to help the Saudis reduce civilian casualties—particularly in the first few years of the conflict, when the coalition relied heavily on airpower, committed few ground forces, and often operated at altitudes that made its strikes less effective and more deadly to civilians. Yet Washington's policy also tied the United States more closely to the Saudi-led campaign and, by extension, to international criticism of that campaign. And while U.S. assistance improved the coalition's military performance, it did not produce a political strategy for ending the war.

After the Biden administration took office and shifted the U.S. approach more toward diplomacy, a fragile truce began in April 2022. It formally expired six months later, but the parties avoided a return to cross-border attacks, showing that violence could be reduced through diplomacy, reciprocal restraint, and limited concessions (e.g., allowing fuel imports through Hodeida port and commercial flights from Sanaa airport). Yet the truce did not resolve the political conflict or eliminate the Houthis' military capabilities.

When the Gaza war erupted in October 2023, the Houthis sought to show solidarity with Iran-aligned Hamas by launching missiles and drones at Israel and dramatically increasing their **attacks against shipping (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/menamaritime/)** in the Red Sea. In response, the Biden administration launched airstrikes against the group in January 2024. A year later, the Trump administration conducted Operation Rough Rider in Yemen from March to May 2025, ending the campaign in exchange for an Omani-brokered agreement halting Houthi attacks on American vessels—though the group continued striking other targets in the region. By September, the ongoing attacks led Israel to target Houthi infrastructure, including Hodeida's port. Meanwhile, the Saudi-led coalition **fractured in December (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-seismic-shift-has-consequences-beyond-its-borders)** after the Emirati-backed Southern

Transitional Council launched an offensive against Yemeni government forces, prompting a rift between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and the withdrawal of Emirati forces.

Today, a familiar pattern seems to be unfolding—the conflict flares up, the United States provides military support, the Houthis absorb the punishment and adapt, and the underlying conflict remains unresolved. In recent weeks, Washington has accelerated weapons deliveries, deployed **(https://www.cnn.com/2026/09/10/politics/us-military-support-saudi-arabia-houthi-iran-yemen)** advisors to assist with intelligence and targeting, resumed **(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2026/10/us-quietly-aids-saudi-arabias-yemen-campaign-intel-refueling)** refueling support, and sent another Patriot missile battery **(https://www.axios.com/2026/10/02/patriot-missiles-iran-war-saudi-arabia-qatar)** to protect the kingdom's energy facilities. Yet this approach cannot resolve the conflict, and it may not even be enough to de-escalate the situation given the changed strategic circumstances noted above—a weary, fractured Saudi coalition with strained weapon stockpiles; a tougher Houthi force that is benefiting from continued Iranian resupply as well as Iranian and Russian battlefield lessons from other conflicts; and a regional picture roiled by U.S. and partner struggles to manage multiple conflicts.

How Washington Can Help Break the Cycle

The United States and Saudi Arabia should recognize that the Yemen conflict cannot be resolved through force, and that a broader campaign could provoke heavier Houthi retaliation, consume scarce resources, and tie the Yemen file more tightly to the Iran crisis. Washington should therefore limit its military assistance to defensive help and make diplomacy its primary tool, focusing less on defeating the Houthis and more on the narrower goals mentioned above: protecting Saudi civilians and U.S. personnel, keeping major waterways open, and creating the conditions for renewed negotiations. When Saudi Arabia asks for more, the "more" should be political, not military.

The most immediate objective should be to change the parties' calculations. The Houthis must face higher diplomatic and financial costs for attacking Saudi Arabia and commercial shipping, as well as greater difficulty resupplying their arsenal via Iran—though these sticks will need to be mixed with appropriate carrots as described below. For its part, Riyadh must understand that the United States will not support an open-ended offensive. And both sides need to be shown that restraint and negotiations are more advantageous than continued escalation. Washington should prioritize these efforts as follows—with some proceeding simultaneously—and coordinate as much as possible with Oman, other regional partners **(https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/why-the-us-cant-help-saudi-arabia-by-bombing-yemen-to-stability)**, the United Nations, and key European governments:

- **Help Saudi Arabia protect vulnerable civilian and energy sites by accelerating deliveries of interceptors, counter-drone systems, and early-warning technology. Washington should also help the kingdom repair damaged infrastructure and coordinate defensive deployments with European and regional partners, including narrowly focused cooperation with Israel.**
- **Do more to disrupt Iranian weapons transfers by sharing intelligence, conducting maritime interdictions, enacting targeted sanctions on Houthi financial networks, and diplomatically isolating the group.**
- **Keep humanitarian access to Yemeni ports open and ensure this is a central condition of U.S. policy toward the country.**
- **Press Riyadh to distinguish between immediate, urgent defensive operations and an open-ended offensive campaign aimed at defeating the Houthis.**
- **Push for a verifiable halt to Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia, accompanied by Saudi limits on offensive operations beyond what is necessary for ensuring the kingdom's immediate defensive needs and guaranteeing humanitarian**

access to Yemen. Oman and the UN can help mediate and monitor an agreement on these steps, as they did in 2022. To incentivize Houthi restraint, offer the group sanctions relief if attacks cease, along with potential port access to commercial goods and participation in political talks.

- As the situation de-escalates, build toward broader negotiations that address the main points of dispute between the Houthis, the Yemeni government, and other local factions, including long-term port access, revenue, salaries, prisoners, weapons, territory, and political institutions. The goal is to establish a monitored security arrangement and an inclusive political process involving all of the country's major factions. Crucially, all sides must offer assurances that they will not simply exploit such negotiations to buy time for future assaults.
- Gradually help Saudi Arabia make permanent improvements to its air and missile defenses and harden its critical infrastructure, which could make the kingdom more self-sufficient in case of future hostilities.

The choice facing Washington is not between abandoning Saudi Arabia or launching another war in Yemen—it is between using military support as an end in itself, or using limited defensive assistance to support a detailed political strategy.

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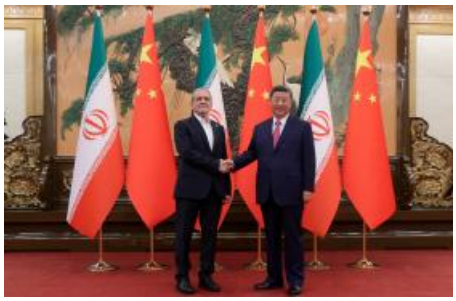
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