

# Freedom to Navigate: Ending the Houthi Threat

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## Introduction

On September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, the Houthis seized Sana'a, marking the beginning of the Yemeni Civil War and the world's worst humanitarian crisis<sup>1</sup>. Following Israel's invasion of Gaza, the Houthis began concentrating their attacks on the Bab al-Mandab Strait, diverting global maritime traffic, driving up shipping costs and sparking world-wide price hikes.

This analysis will provide a brief overview of who the Houthis are, what their attacks since October have consisted of, the ensuing economic repercussions of the attacks, and the subsequent U.S. approach to end them, concluding with policy-based solutions aimed at ending the violence.

## Historical Background

The Houthis sprang out of northern Yemen in the 1990's, aiming to restore the Zayid Dynasty<sup>2</sup> and expand the influence of Zayidism across Yemen<sup>3</sup>. The Houthis were radicalized following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, adopting their current motto, "God is great, death to the U.S., death to Israel, curse be upon the Jews, and victory for Islam,".

The "Houthi Wars" began with the death of Houthi leader Al-Houthi, and the six ensuing uprisings, culminating in the capture of Yemen's capital, Sana'a. The Houthis then captured Hodeidah and Aden, controlling critical choke points in the Red Sea. Holding de facto control over Northwestern Yemen and isolated from East Yemen, the Houthis now act with impunity, as the Yemeni government is too weak to mount an offensive.

## Red Sea Crisis

They began launching attacks on global shipping following October 7th. "*We have emphasized to everyone that operations are to support the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip, and that we cannot stand idly by in the face of the aggression and siege*".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Blanchard, Christopher M. Yemen: Conflict, Red Sea Attacks, and U.S. Policy. Congressional Research Service, IF12581, October 24, 2024. [Link](#).

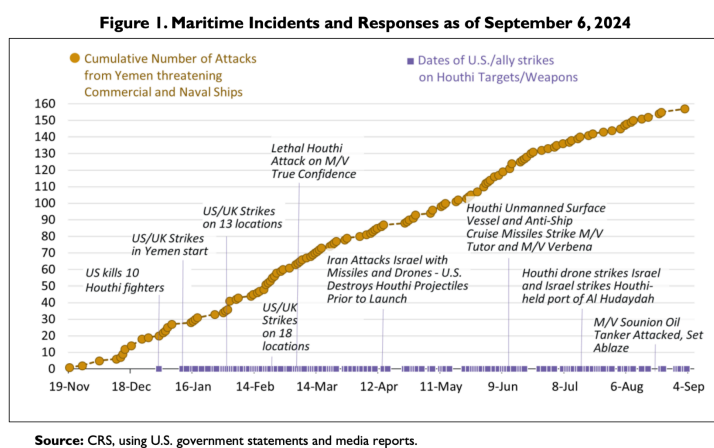
<sup>2</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Ziyādid Dynasty." Encyclopedia Britannica, July 20, 1998. [Link](#)

<sup>3</sup> Yemen 2023 International Religious Freedom Report. U.S. Department of State, April 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>4</sup> Al Jazeera. *Who Are Yemen's Houthis? A Basic Guide*. Al Jazeera, January 12, 2024. [Link](#).

The first successful attack occurred on November 19th, 2023, with the seizure of the Israeli-owned Galaxy Leader. The success of this capture became hard for the Houthis to replicate, failing to seize other vessels, culminating in the failure to capture the Maersk Hangzhou, resulting in the death of 10 Houthis.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, their strategy shifted to sinking vessels using long range missile strikes, with attacks ramping up in accordance with “phases of attack”. Initially only focusing Israeli ships, then including all ships headed to Israel and all U.S. and U.K ships, with the current and final phase now including any ship who has ever serviced an Israeli port<sup>6</sup>. As of now, over 80 commercial vessels, and 190 vessels in total, have been attacked, with more than 65 countries being directly affected.<sup>7</sup>



Despite advanced weapons arsenal, the means used to discriminate between targets are extremely flawed. 14% of the ships attacked were chosen using outdated ownership data, one example being the Andromeda Star<sup>8</sup>. On repeated occasions attacks have been claimed on the wrong vessel, or on vessels not in the Red Sea, for example, on May 7th they claimed to have hit the MSC Michaela, which was in the Atlantic Ocean at the time.

<sup>5</sup> Knights, Michael. The Houthis' Evolving War Effort and Regional Implications. CTC Sentinel, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, April 2024 [Link](#).

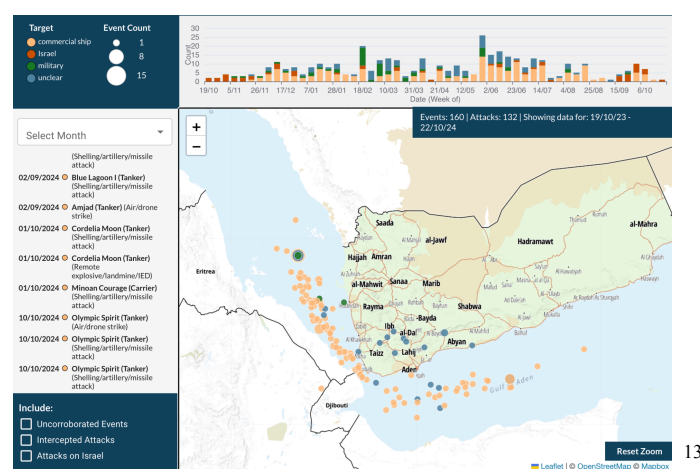
<sup>6</sup> The Houthis' Expanding Regional Threats. CTC Sentinel, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, September 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>7</sup> Houthi Ship Attacks Pose a Longer-Term Challenge to Regional Security and Trade Plans. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>8</sup> Tolba, Ahmed, and Lisa Baertlein. "Yemen's Houthis Say Their Missiles Hit Andromeda Star Oil Ship in Red Sea." Reuters, April 26, 2024. [Link](#)

37% of ships struck did not meet the Houthis' own criteria for attack, as even countries aligned with the Houthis have been targeted. The Houthis on repeated occasions have attacked Iranian<sup>9</sup>, Chinese, and Russian ships even after Chinese and Russian diplomats agreed to support the Houthis in the United Nations Security Council in exchange for safe passage.<sup>1011</sup> Most confusingly they struck vessels supplying their own ports, like in the case of the Cyclades.<sup>12</sup>

Their attacks have recently ventured further south of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden, close to Socotra, showing how if they continue to be unopposed, expeditionary forces will eventually go into the Indian Ocean where even the threat of attack can cause pandemonium in global shipping.



## Global Economic Effects

These attacks have had detrimental effects on global shipping routes; whereas prior to the crisis, the Red Sea accounted for 15% of international maritime trade, 12% of global trade; it now suffers massive drops in trade volume. The volume of shipping containers has dropped by 90%, with the total shipping volume now standing at 63% of pre-Oct 7th levels. This has coincided with severe drought in the Panama Canal dropping transits by 49%, further exacerbating the situation.

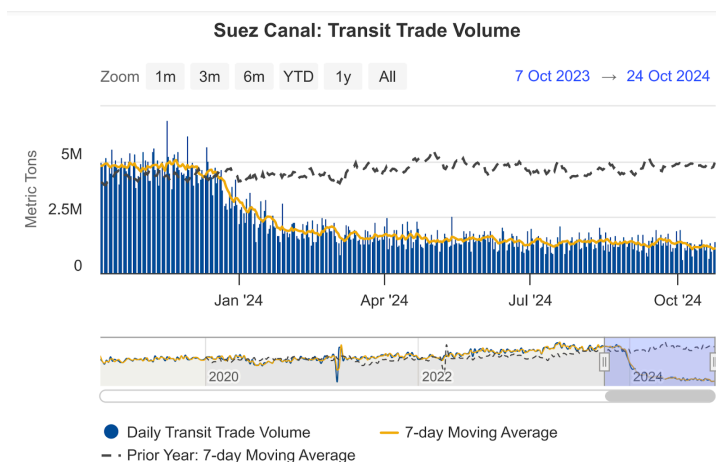
<sup>9</sup> "Yemen's Houthi Rebels Target Carrier Ship Bound for Iran, Their Main Supporter." CBS News, February 12, 2024. [Link](#)

<sup>10</sup> Days after these negotiations, the Houthis shot 5 missiles at the Chinese "Huang Pu" and in January attacked the Russian "Khalissa" Mongilio, Heather. "Chinese Tanker Hit with Houthi Missile in the Red Sea." USNI News, March 24, 2024. [Link](#)

<sup>11</sup> Bockmann, Michelle Wiese. "Houthis in Failed Missile Strike on Russia-Linked Tanker in Gulf of Aden." Lloyd's List, January 13, 2024. [Link](#)

<sup>12</sup> Bockmann, Michelle Wiese. "Bulkier Hit by Houthis Called in Port Controlled by the Militants Earlier This Month." Lloyd's List, April 30, 2024. [Link](#)

<sup>13</sup> ACLED Data. "Red Sea Attacks Dashboard." Yemen Conflict Observatory. Accessed November 1, 2024. [Link](#).



Shipping companies have had to divert their routes through Cape of Good Hope, which has now seen an 70% uptick in traffic<sup>14</sup>. This route adds 11,000 nautical miles, doubles shipping times, whilst costing an additional \$1 million<sup>15</sup>, not even mentioning the environmental damage, as shipping companies burn more fuel to increase their speed, “*which could increase emissions by 70 percent on the Singapore-Rotterdam route.*”<sup>16</sup>

This has shot up shipping prices, peaking at a 233% price hike<sup>17</sup>. These increases are partly driven by insurance rates, rising from the normal rate of 0.6 the total value of the cargo ship to 2%, including a war risk premium. “*The success rate of Houthi attacks is low, but they don’t need to hit accurately, as long as they manage to scare international actors, they have achieved a victory, since they increase insurance prices and thus cause increased costs around the world,*”<sup>18</sup>

This has the added possibility of raising global inflation rates, projected to possibly rise by 0.18 by the end of 2024, and by 0.23 in 2025.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Chokepoint Risks and Houthi Attacks on Red Sea Shipping. IMF Portwatch, 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>15</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>16</sup> According to experts at the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development. The Strategic Impact of Houthi Attacks on Red Sea Shipping. European Parliamentary Research Service, 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>17</sup> Drewry’s World Container Index rose sharply, with the average cost to transport a 40-foot container jumping from \$1,521 to \$3,777 between December 14, 2023, and January 18, 2024. Global Economic Consequences of Attacks on Red Sea Shipping Lanes. Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>18</sup> Top Shipping Company Warns of Global Impact of Houthi Attacks on Vessels in Red Sea. Foundation for Defense of Democracies, July 17, 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>19</sup> Schwarzenberg, Andres B. “Red Sea Shipping Disruptions: Estimating Economic Effects.” Congressional Research Service, May 8, 2024. [Link](#)

The countries which have been most affected by the Houthis blockade are those who depend the most on the Red Sea, namely Egypt, which has seen revenues from the Suez canal drop by 40%, the equivalent of \$4 billion dollars, or 1% of the total GDP. Also at risk are Kenya, Tanzania, and Djibouti.

## U.S. Response

In response, the U.S launched Operation Prosperity Guardian<sup>20</sup> in December 2023 and designated the Houthis as a terrorist group in January of this year.<sup>21</sup> As of now, the U.S. with its partners, have managed to intercept over 62% of Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and launched attacks on Houthi targets in Yemen<sup>22</sup>. The targets of these strikes included Houthi fuel depots; onshore missile and drone stockpiles; and training grounds.

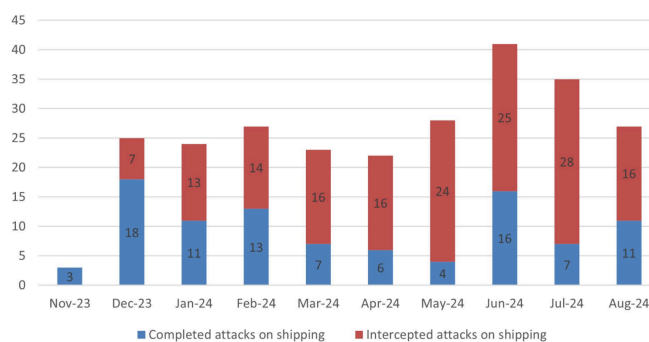


Figure 1: Houthi operational tempo against shipping

These attacks, destroying over 150 Houthi missile launch sites, as well as various other key military installations, constituted the “*most heated combat since World War II*”<sup>23</sup>, and ended up costing over \$1 billion USD solely on munitions, not including the costs of deploying 7,000 sailors and the use of the \$2 billion dollar B2-Stealth Bombers to attack underground installations.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the costs of these attacks, the real damage done to the Houthi efforts has been ambiguous. What is clear is that Houthi weapons stores have been temporarily drained<sup>25</sup>, though this victory is short

<sup>20</sup> “Statement from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea.” U.S. Department of Defense, December 18, 2023. [Link](#)

<sup>21</sup> Terrorist Designation of the Houthis. U.S. Department of State, 2021. [Link](#)

<sup>22</sup> Sanaa experienced the most strikes, being struck 33 times, Al-Jabana struck 26 times, the Nakhila coast was attacked 19 times, the Al-Faza canals 11 times, and the missile depots at Jebels al-Milh, Qimma, and Jadaa were struck 13 times collectively [Link](#).

<sup>23</sup> “Houthi Explainer: The Conflict in the Red Sea. United States Institute of Peace, July 18, 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>24</sup> US Says B-2 Bombers Launched Precision Strikes Against Houthis in Yemen. Al Jazeera, October 17, 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>25</sup> “*the Houthis (combining launches and pre-launch losses) may have depleted their reserves to the tune of around 135 ASBMs, 87 ASCMs or other cruise missiles, 263 one-way attack or larger surveillance drones*” Knights, Michael. “Assessing the Houthi War Effort Since October 2023.” CTC Sentinel April 2024: 1-16. [Link](#)

lived, as the U.S. coalition has failed to properly address the root of the issue, Iranian resupplies, which can replenish these weapons stores just as fast as the U.S. can destroy them.

Since 2015, Iran has been funding the Houthis providing over \$300 million annually along with the missiles and intelligence to attack vessels. *“We know that Iran was deeply involved in planning the operations against commercial vessels in the Red Sea.”*<sup>26</sup> Between October and January, at least 4 supply vessels originating from Iranian arsenals reached Houthi ports capable of supplying upwards of 30 tons of military supplies.

Attempts to thwart these resupplies have had limited success, as despite various interceptions, the Houthis continue to receive arms shipments. Some interceptions have included a Somalian shipment of propulsion grenades, guidance systems, and warheads; and an Iranian shipment of missile homing systems. Sanctions have also been put in place by the Department of Treasury on persons or corporations directing funds to the Houthi effort.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of these efforts, the Houthis continue to escalate their efforts, threatening to strike deep into the Indian Ocean and near the Cape of Good Hope. Their strength has only grown, reporting 160,000 new troops, with their continued attacks only displaying their resilience in the face of mounting pressure. Due to the procurement of advanced ABSM's the Houthis have been able to launch their attacks from anywhere in their territory, concealing themselves from the U.S. in the rugged terrain of Northern Yemen.

## Conclusion and Policy Solutions

As we have seen, the Houthis have been able to inflict damage on a global scale thanks to their isolated geographical position and backing from Iran. Despite varied and costly efforts, the U.S. and its allies have so far failed to bring an end to Houthi attacks. To effectively end the crisis, a balanced policy based solution must be undertaken, emphasizing necessary domestic changes bolstered by international cooperation.

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<sup>26</sup> *Houthi Explainer: Ties to Iran*. United States Institute of Peace, July 18, 2024. [Link](#).

<sup>27</sup> Included in these sanctions are Hong Kong-based “*Guangzhou Tasneem Trading Company Limited*”, the Omani “*International Smart Digital Interface*”, Chinese “*Ningbo Beilun Saige Machine*”; and the UAE-based “*Stellar Wave Marine*”. Treasury Sanctions Network Facilitating Houthi Arms Procurement and Regional Destabilization. U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 23, 2024 [Link](#).

First and foremost, the political situation domestically in Yemen must see drastic shifts to properly counter the Houthis. Since Oct 7th, the Houthis have been gaining popularity in Yemen due to widespread support for the Palestinian cause; diverting public attention from domestic conditions, incentivizing the Houthis to continue their attacks even past a resolution in between Israel and Gaza.

The only solution is one that starts with the Yemenis changing the status quo and removing the Houthi monopoly on violence. By improving conditions on the ground through UN and U.S. support, Houthi recruitment can be slowed by protecting vulnerable communities and boosting regional security in the contested areas. The Republic of Yemen should aim to provide public services and modernize the military, allowing them to push back against the Houthis, and prevent the confiscation of state resources, extortion of businesses, and appropriation of humanitarian aid. If the needs of the population are met and resource appropriation is deterred, the Houthis would lose their current invulnerability at home, and land warfare with the Yemeni government would split their efforts and drive attention away from continuing their anti-shipping campaign.

The next most pressing issue would be to effectively prevent further Iranian supply shipments via military blockade paired with continued strikes on Houthi military installations, draining weapons stockades whilst preventing resupplies.

Severely weakened, the Houthis would be forced back to the negotiating table as they had been in the ceasefire agreements in 2022 and 2023, with these peace talks involving regional actors Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran, as they had in the past.

This would allow for the re-introduction of humanitarian aid, the strengthening the Republic of Yemen, allowing for the distribution of resources without fear of Houthi seizures or reprisals.

Following this, global arms sales to Yemen would be strictly supervised through sanctions to prevent illicit weapons flow into the hands of the Houthis, in an upscaled form of the current sanctions.

From this position, the Yemeni government could begin stabilizing the region through infrastructure, education, and health services, further depleting Houthi recruitment pools and support, as the Houthis would lack the resources to provide for their population, causing a wave of migration to East



Yemen in search of better standards of living, essentially crippling the Houthis, and opening the door for the Yemeni government to reinstate their authority in the West and retake control of the strait.

This approach would require balance, addressing security and humanitarian needs simultaneously, only accomplishable through international cooperation. Through these efforts, the path to a stable and prosperous Yemen could begin, reducing tensions and possibly bringing peace to the most conflict stricken region of the 21st century.

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