

Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea: Issues for Congress

January 12, 2024

Overview

Since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks and Israel's ongoing military response in Gaza, Iran-supported militias have increased attacks in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the Red Sea. The Houthis, an Iran-backed force in Yemen, have repeatedly targeted Israeli territory as well as international commercial vessels transiting the Bab al Mandeb Strait, a [key maritime choke point](#). In response, the U.S. Navy and other navies have intercepted Houthi-launched projectiles, formed a coalition to patrol the Red Sea, and issued warnings to the Houthis to halt attacks. Nevertheless, these attacks have persisted, diverting traffic from the Red Sea and [driving up shipping costs](#).

On January 11, 2024, the United States, United Kingdom, and others [conducted joint strikes](#) on 60 Houthi targets across 16 different locations in Yemen. Prior to these strikes, some lawmakers had criticized the Biden Administration's response and called for greater pressure on the Houthis. President Joe Biden entered office in 2021 [vowing to pursue de-escalation of Yemen's civil war](#). More recently, U.S. officials have indicated reluctance to rekindle the war in Yemen amid U.N.-brokered talks. U.S. officials continue to state their goal of keeping the Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza from escalating into a broader regional war.

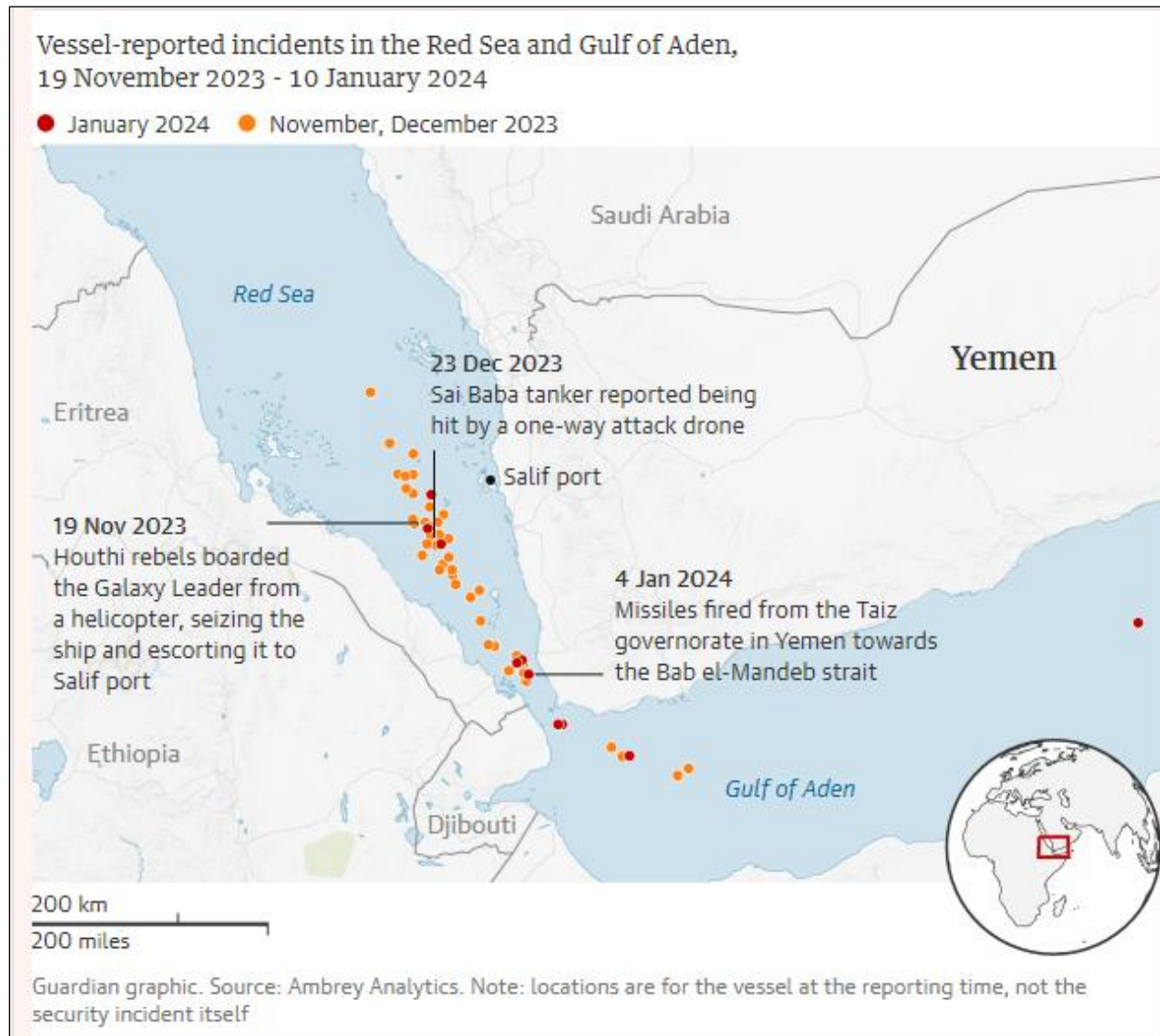
The Houthis: Background and Iranian Support

[The Houthi movement](#) (formally known as Ansar Allah or Partisans of God), a predominantly Zaydi Shia revivalist political and insurgent movement, was formed in northern Yemen in 2004 under the leadership of members of the Houthi family. Ideologically, the group has espoused anti-American and anti-Zionist beliefs. From 2004 to 2014, the Houthi movement consolidated power in northern Yemen, combating Saudi Arabia to its north and the former Yemeni central government to its south. In 2014, after a national dialogue failed to address long-standing Houthi grievances, the group launched a military campaign, culminating in the overthrow of the internationally recognized government, which then sought military intervention from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Yemen's ensuing armed conflict, which has been in stasis since 2022, remains unresolved and has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands and exacerbated humanitarian conditions in the Middle East's poorest country.

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Figure I. Reported Maritime Incidents in the Red Sea as of January 10, 2024

Source: The Guardian (UK), “Red Sea crisis: UN security council demands immediate end to Houthi attacks,” January 11, 2024.

Note: CRS cannot independently verify the location and nature of reported maritime events depicted.

Iran has provided the Houthis with components and technical knowledge to construct long-range missiles and rockets and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and Houthi fighters have trained at an [Iranian naval academy](#) and received instruction from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). [The Houthis now wield](#) anti-ship ballistic missiles and UAVs with ranges up to 1,000 miles. Iran has deployed [an aging frigate](#) in the Red Sea to provide the Houthis with assistance in planning attacks and with “[tactical intelligence](#).”

Attacks in the Red Sea

From October to December 2023, Houthi leader Abdel Malek Al Houthi [threatened](#) to intervene on behalf of the Palestinians against Israel, announced that the [Houthis would attack Israeli ships in the Red Sea](#), and expanded potential targets to include [all ships sailing to Israeli ports](#) unless Gaza received “the food

and medicine it needs.” In reality, the Houthis have targeted commercial vessels indiscriminately, compelling [some commercial shippers](#) to divert tankers from the Red Sea to the lengthier and costlier voyage around Africa’s Cape of Good Hope. As of January 11, U.S. Central Command reports that, since October 17, [the Houthis have attacked/harassed 27 ships](#) in the Red Sea.

U.S. Response

Prior to the coalition strikes on January 11, U.S. naval forces responded militarily to Houthi provocations by [intercepting targets](#) and [interdicting attempted Houthi seizures](#) of vessels. On December 18, the United States launched Operation Prosperity Guardian, a 22-nation coalition under the command of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT). To date, five countries [have contributed or pledged to contribute warships](#). Bahrain, where NAVCENT is headquartered, is the only Arab member of the coalition. Diplomatically, on January 3, 2024, [the United States and 13 partners warned](#) that the Houthis would “bear the responsibility of the consequences” should they persist in their attacks.

On January 9, the Houthis [launched their largest barrage](#), all of which the U.S. Navy intercepted. On January 10, the [United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2722](#), which condemned Houthi attacks and took note of the right Member States have to defend their vessels from attack. After the coordinated U.S.-U.K. strikes on January 11, [President Biden said](#), “I will not hesitate to direct further measures to protect our people and the free flow of international commerce as necessary.” The Houthis claim that five individuals were killed in the strikes and have [vowed to continue their attacks](#).

Issues for Congress

The January 11 strikes received [some bipartisan approval](#), though some lawmakers called them [long overdue](#) while [others criticized the President](#) for taking military action without first seeking congressional approval. [Some lawmakers](#) have called for additional U.S. pressure, such as a redesignation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). In February 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken revoked the Trump Administration’s January 2021 designations of the Houthis as a FTO and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity, [stating](#), “We have listened to warnings from the United Nations, humanitarian groups, and bipartisan members of Congress, among others, that the designations could have a devastating impact on Yemenis’ access to basic commodities like food and fuel.” [According to one report](#), the Administration is reviewing a possible Houthi redesignation. Overall, the Biden Administration has been careful not to reignite Yemen’s civil war. [According to a U.S. official](#), “On the Yemen civil war, we have worked for three years to wind down that war.... And that is something that we continue to support.” In its legislative and oversight roles, Congress may consider the balance of possible benefits from offensive action against risks of a broader regional conflict including Iran.

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