



Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea: Issues for Congress

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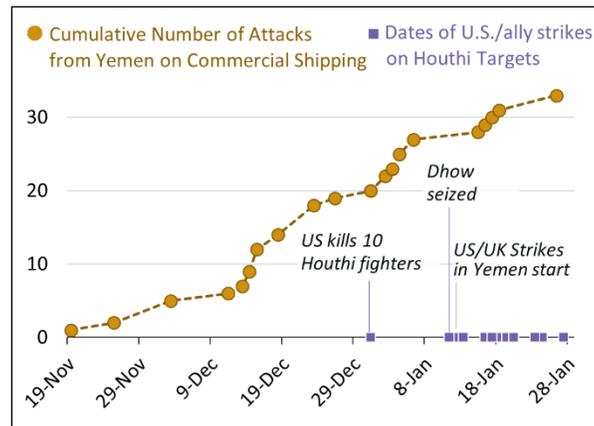
Since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks and Israel's military response in Gaza, the *Ansar Allah*/Houthi movement, an Iran-backed force in Yemen, has targeted (**Figure 1**) Israeli territory and commercial and naval vessels near the Bab al Mandeb Strait, a key maritime choke point. In response, the United States, its allies, and partners have intercepted Houthi-launched projectiles, formed a coalition to patrol the Red Sea, demanded the Houthis halt attacks, [designated](#) the Houthis and Houthi [defense figures](#) for sanctions, and struck Houthi targets in Yemen. Nevertheless, attacks have persisted, diverting maritime traffic from the Red Sea and [driving up shipping costs](#). On January 10, the [United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2722](#), condemning Houthi attacks and noting member states' rights to defend their vessels.

On January 11, 2024, the United States, the 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 long-running civil war](#). U.S. and allied strikes have continued, as officials reiterate their goals of avoiding regional war and [express concern](#) that Houthi attacks and international responses may undermine progress made toward peace in Yemen.

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Figure 1. Maritime Incidents and Responses as of January 28, 2024

Source: CRS, using U.S. government statements and media reports.

Note: Attack incidents involving multiple targets may be considered a single incident. Data subject to revision.

The Houthis: Background, Conflict, and Iranian Support

The Houthi movement (formally known as *Ansar Allah* or Partisans of God) is a predominantly Zaydi Shia revivalist political and insurgent movement formed by the Houthi family in northern Yemen in 2004. The group espouses anti-American and anti-Zionist beliefs. From 2004 to 2014, it consolidated local power, at times warring with Saudi Arabia to its north and the former Yemeni central government to its south. In 2014, after the Houthis rejected the results of a national dialogue, the group resumed its insurgent posture, seized the capital, Sana'a, and later advanced on Aden. Yemen's then-leaders fled and requested international intervention. In March 2015, a coalition led by Saudi Arabia began a counter-Houthi military campaign. Houthi cross-border attacks grew in complexity and scope over time with deepening support from Iran. An uneasy truce has frozen conflict lines since 2022.

Iran has provided the Houthis with components and technical knowledge to construct long-range missiles and rockets and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). 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. In January, Iran deployed **an aging frigate** in the Red Sea ostensibly to **escort** Iranian ships, but some observers suspect it provides the Houthis with assistance in planning attacks and with **"tactical intelligence."**

Attacks in the Red Sea

In October 2023, the Houthis **threatened** to intervene on behalf of the Palestinians against Israel, and in November the Houthis announced that they **would attack Israeli ships in the Red Sea** and downed a U.S. drone. In December, the Houthis expanded potential targets to include **all ships sailing to Israeli ports** if humanitarian aid delivery to Gaza was not expanded. In January, the group responded to U.S.-led strikes in Yemen by threatening U.S.- and U.K.-owned vessels. Many Houthi attacks on commercial vessels have not appeared discriminate or linked to stated demands. Since October 17, **the Houthis have attacked commercial and naval vessels more than 30 times** (Figure 1). The threats compel **many firms** to divert vessels from the Red Sea to the lengthier and costlier voyage around Africa.

U.S. Response

Prior to the start of U.S.-led coalition strikes in Yemen, U.S. naval forces responded militarily to Houthi provocations by **intercepting Houthi missiles and UAVs** and **interdicting attempted Houthi vessel seizures**. Interception incidents continued throughout January. Operation Prosperity Guardian, a 22-nation coalition led by U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), has operated since December 2023. Bahrain,

where NAVCENT is headquartered, is the [only](#) Arab member of the coalition. Two U.S. servicemembers died in a January [operation](#) that seized Iranian-origin missile components and weapons on a Yemen-bound ship. In January 2024, the Biden Administration [announced](#) that the Houthis would be redesignated as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT), effective February 16, and [sanctioned](#) Houthi officials.

Diplomatic [joint statements](#) have [endorsed](#) U.S. and U.K. military strikes against the Houthis and demanded an end to what they described as the Houthis' "illegal and unjustifiable attacks." Canada, Australia, Bahrain, and the Netherlands have provided "[nonoperational support](#)" for strikes. U.S. officials have [asserted](#) that U.S. action is "grounded in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter" and "reflects our inherent right to self-defense." The President [informed](#) Congress that he ordered the January 11 strikes "pursuant to my constitutional authority as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive and to conduct United States foreign relations."

Issues for Congress

U.S.-led strikes have received [some bipartisan approval](#), though some lawmakers call them [long overdue](#) or call for more, while [others call them "unauthorized"](#) or [question](#) the Administration's legal views on the matter. [Some lawmakers](#) call for a redesignation of the Houthis as a [Foreign Terrorist Organization \(FTO\)](#), a status with legally defined designation and revocation criteria. Risks include a widening conflict involving the United States or the potential for resumption of Yemen's civil war. U.S. goals in Yemen include consolidating U.N.-backed peace efforts, restoring maritime security, interdicting Iranian weapons, combatting transnational terrorists, ensuring humanitarian aid delivery, and preventing wider war. Congress may weigh these varied goals in considering possible [requests](#) for supplemental funding and issues [related](#) to [authorization](#) for the use of force.

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