



# Failure to Deter Houthi Attacks Endangers Global Shipping

Ari Cicurel  
Assistant Director of Foreign Policy

Zac Schildcrout  
Policy Analyst

*On December 3, the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen launched projectile attacks in the Red Sea against three commercial vessels—the M/V Unity Explorer, the M/V Number 9, and the M/V Sophie II. Iran effectively now sits astride and can harass commercial traffic through two economically vital waterways—the Strait of Hormuz in the Arabian Gulf and Bab el-Mandeb in the Red Sea. The effects of the Houthis’ attacks are already having an economic impact. Insurance costs for commercial shipping through the Red Sea have nearly tripled while some ships have chosen to avoid the region altogether by taking the longer and more costly route around Africa.*

*The United States has at least responded with force to some Iran-backed attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, though not effectively or frequently enough to deter further attacks. In the Red Sea, however, there has not even been a U.S. attempt to deter or target the origin of the Houthi attacks. Absent such U.S. action, the Iranian regime and the Houthis will continue their aggression, with global economic impacts. To deter further Houthi and other Iran-backed attacks, the United States should employ consistent and strong military force against Iran-linked targets, specifically fighters, that attack U.S. personnel, interests, and partners, as well as global shipping, and the Biden administration should redesignate the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization (FTO).*

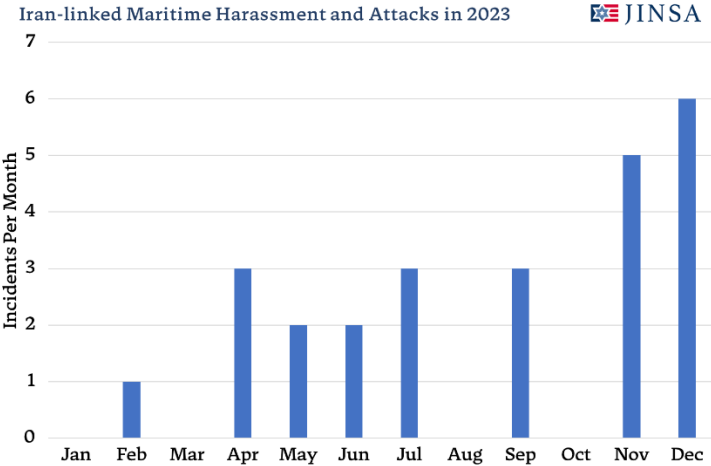
## What Happened?

- On December 3, the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen [attacked](#) three ships with connections to 14 different nations as they sailed in international waters in the Red Sea.
  - » Around 9:15 a.m. local time on December 3, the Houthis [fired](#) an anti-ship ballistic missile toward the Bahamian-flagged M/V *Unity Explorer* while it was [south](#) of Yemen’s west coast. The missile impacted near the vessel, which Israeli businessman Danny Unger owns.
  - » At approximately 12:35 p.m. local time, the Houthis [launched](#) another missile that struck the *Unity Explorer*. The USS *Carney* responded to the crew’s distress call and subsequently intercepted an incoming drone.
  - » At roughly 3:30 p.m. local time, a Houthi missile [struck](#) the Panamanian-flagged, Bermuda- and U.K.-owned and operated M/V *Number 9*. There were no reported casualties or damage.
  - » At about 4:30 p.m. local time, the Houthis [struck](#) the Panamanian-flagged M/V *Sophie II* with a missile, and the USS *Carney* responded to its distress call and subsequently intercepted an incoming drone.
- On December 3, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a [post](#) on X that it has “every reason to believe that these [December 3] attacks, while launched by the Houthis in Yemen, are fully enabled by Iran.”

## Why Is It Important?

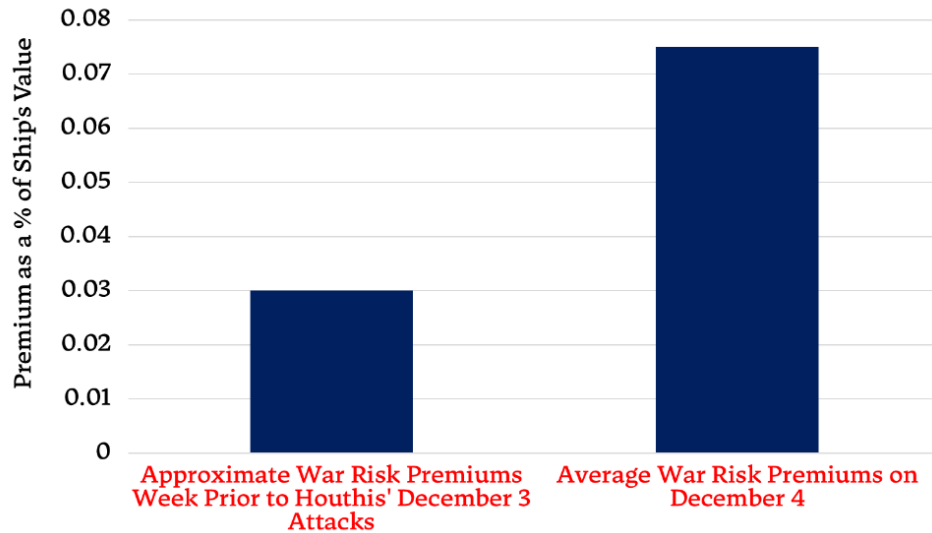
- The Houthis' maritime harassment and attacks threaten the lives of civilians, U.S. forces, and America's regional partners like Israel while imperiling shipping in an economically vital waterway. Iran-linked harassment of U.S. Navy ships and the targeting of commercial vessels, including those with Israeli ownership, indicate that the Houthis and their Iranian regime benefactors seek to escalate their pressure on the United States and Israel amid the resumption of combat between Israel and Hamas. The failure to use military force to deter Iran-backed maritime attacks has also contributed to the collapse of deterrence against Iran-backed groups that has further encouraged escalating attacks against U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria.
- As a maritime nation, the United States has an interest in safeguarding the global freedom of navigation through international waterways. Ensuring the free flow of commerce is vital to the global economy, in particular through [Middle Eastern maritime chokepoints](#) in the Gulf. The Red Sea and other waterways in the Middle East are vital to global commerce and the disruption of the free flow of travel through them disrupts global markets.
  - » Roughly 10 percent of global trade [transits](#) the Red Sea. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, 8.8 million barrels of oil per day [pass](#) through the Bab el-Mandeb strait between Yemen and Djibouti and the Red Sea.
  - » The effect of a disruption to commercial shipping through the Red Sea was demonstrated in 2021, when the *Ever Given* container ship blocked the Suez Canal, which connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, costing an [estimated \\$9.6 billion](#) daily.
- Since Hamas's massive attack targeting civilians in Israel on October 7 and the ensuing Israel-Hamas [war](#), the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen have attacked at least five commercial vessels in international waters in the Red Sea, including ships connected to Israel. In addition to three ships attacked on December 3:
  - » On November 26, two ballistic missiles were [fired](#) from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen toward the general location of the USS *Mason* and the [Israeli-owned](#) commercial ship *M/V Central Park*, landing about 10 nautical miles away from the ships, causing no damage or injuries.
  - » On November 19, the Houthis [hijacked](#) Bahamian-flagged, British-owned *Galaxy Leader* in the Red Sea. Israeli businessman Abraham Ungar partially owns the ship.
- The Houthis have also launched drones and missiles above international waters in the Red Sea that have targeted U.S. Navy ships or nearby locations and Israel.
  - » On November 28, the USS *Carney* shot down an Iranian drone [launched](#) from Yemen as it approached the ship.
  - » On November 26, the Houthis [fired](#) two ballistic missiles that landed within ten miles of the USS *Mason*.
  - » On November 15, the USS *Thomas Hudner* [shot down](#) an Iranian drone launched from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen as it flew towards the warship in the Red Sea.
  - » On October 15, the Houthis [launched](#) five cruise missiles and thirty [drones](#) towards southern Israel. The USS *Carney* intercepted all the drones and four of the cruise missiles, and Saudi Arabia intercepted one cruise missile.

- On December 2 and 3, the Iranian regime and the Iran-backed Houthis [conducted](#) more maritime harassment and attacks (six) than during all of November (five), already setting a new record total for attacks in a single month that had been established last month.
  - » The same number of incidents have already occurred in November and December as from January to August this year.



- This Iran-linked maritime aggression raises the costs of global shipping through critical waterways in the Middle East.
  - » On November 26, the Israeli shipping company ZIM [said](#), “in light of the threat to safe transit of global trade in the Arabian and Red Seas, ZIM is taking temporary proactive measures to ensure the safety of its crews, vessels, and customers’ cargo by re-routing some of its vessels.”
  - » On December 4, Judah Levine, head of research for Freightos, a freight booking platform, [told](#) price reporting agency Freight Waves that several Israeli-owned vessels have transited around Africa instead of through the Suez Canal to avoid safety threats, including “two car carriers, two container vessels operated by Danish carrier Maersk and at least one container vessel by Israel’s Zim Lines.”
  - » A December 4 *Reuters* [report](#), citing insurance industry sources, indicated that war risk premiums that shipping companies pay to insurers stayed between 0.05 percent and 0.1 percent of the value of a ship on December 4, up from 0.03 percent before the Houthis’ December 3 attacks—an increase of tens of thousands of dollars for a week-long voyage.

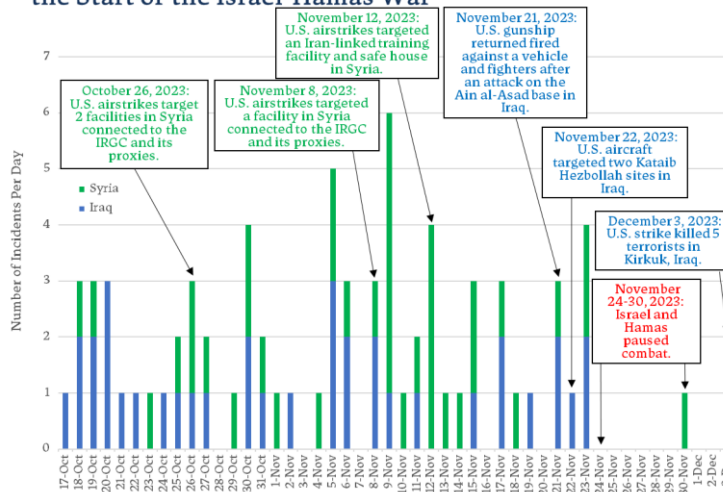
## Houthi Attacks on December 3 Increased War Risk Premiums



Source: [Reuters](#)

- The United States has deployed several military assets to the Middle East amid the Israel-Hamas war, including the USS [Gerald R. Ford](#) and USS [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) Carrier Strike Groups (CSG), a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery and additional Patriot battalions, and additional Air Force F-35, F-15, F-16, and A-10 fighter aircraft squadrons. The United States also [announced](#) on November 6 that it deployed the Ohio-class guided-cruise missile submarine (SSGN) to the region.
  - » The USS *Gerald R. Ford* CSG [includes](#) the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS *Gerald R. Ford* (CVN-78), the *Ticonderoga*-class guided missile cruiser USS *Normandy* (CG 60), as well as the *Arleigh-Burke*-class guided missile destroyers USS *Thomas Hudner* (DDG 116), USS *Ramage* (DDG 61), USS *Carney* (DDG 64), and USS *Roosevelt* (DDG 80).
- While these deployments have helped to intercept projectiles and have assisted commercial vessels facing attacks, the failure to deter Iran-backed maritime harassment and attacks further undermines U.S. deterrence against the Iranian regime. U.S. timidity in responding to Houthi and other Iran-backed attacks in the Middle East has failed to deter further attacks.
  - » There have been at least 76 [attacks](#) targeting U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria in the last seven weeks and only six U.S. responses.
  - » Unlike recent belated yet still insufficient U.S. efforts to expand the scope, rapidity, and intensity of [U.S. strikes](#) against Iran-backed groups that target U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria, the United States has made no such effort to deter aggression from the Houthis and has not used military force against the group.

## Iran-backed Attacks Against U.S. Personnel Since the Start of the Israel-Hamas War



- » An unnamed U.S. official [told Politico](#) on December 4 that the Biden administration is downplaying the severity of the Houthis' attacks in the Red Sea to avoid escalating tensions in the Middle East amid the Israel-Hamas war. Another unnamed U.S. official argued that the administration is stressing the intelligence community's uncertainty as to whether the USS *Carney* was the target of Houthi attacks because the administration is "trying to avoid unnecessary escalation."
  - The Middle East Institute's Charles Lister [wrote](#) on X on December 4 that "two [Department of Defense] insider sources told me today that the #Biden White House has placed (in the words of one) 'every possible handcuff' on the DOD's ability to respond to #Iran proxy attacks. The scale & scope of these attacks are unprecedented — and we're just taking the hits. Dangerous."
- *The New York Times* [reported](#) on December 4 that U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters at the White House that "we are in talks with other countries about a maritime task force of sorts involving the ships from partner nations alongside the United States in ensuring safe passage of ships in the Red Sea," and "those talks are ongoing as we speak. I don't have anything formal to announce. But that would be a natural part of the comprehensive response to what we're seeing."
- As detailed in this [JINSA NatSec Brief](#), the Houthis qualify for all three criteria specified under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act for an FTO designation, specifically that the entity be a foreign organization, conduct terrorism and retain the capability and intent to do so, and threaten U.S. national security or the security of U.S. nationals.
  - » The Biden administration noted in [November 2023](#) that it is considering designating the Houthis an FTO, despite having delisted them in [February 2021](#).
  - » Redesignating the Houthis as an FTO would enable the U.S. government to freeze assets linked to the Houthis and its Iranian regime backers and restrict their entry into the United States.
  - » Placing the Houthis back on the FTO list would also signal support for U.S. regional partners who have routinely faced attacks from the Iran-backed group in recent years.

## What Should the United States Do Next?

- As JINSA has [argued](#), establishing deterrence against Iran and its proxies, including the Houthis, will require consistent and strong U.S. military force against Iran-linked targets, specifically fighters, that attack U.S. personnel and interests in the region.
  - » The Pentagon should deploy to the Red Sea and other Middle Eastern waterways additional naval assets with the capabilities of disrupting projectile attacks, rapidly neutralizing attempts to seize commercial shipping vessels, and launching strikes against terrorist groups responsible for attacks.
- In keeping with the clear [commitment](#) in its 2022 National Security Strategy to “not allow foreign or regional powers to jeopardize freedom of navigation through the Middle East’s waterways,” and in tandem with its deployments to the region, the Biden administration should state unequivocally that the United States will disrupt any further Iranian maritime aggression.
- The Biden administration should redesignate the Houthis as an FTO pursuant to section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act and as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity pursuant to Executive Order 13224.