



Strikes Against the Houthis Should Not Be a One-Off

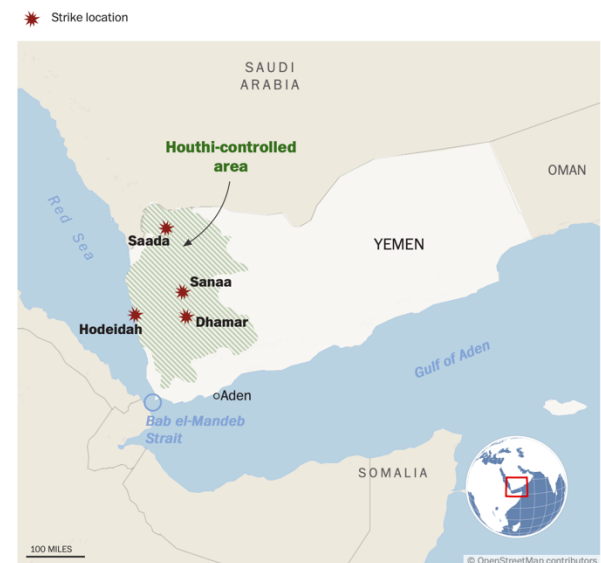
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After more than 40 Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea, the overdue and limited U.S. and British strikes that hit the Iran-backed terrorist group in Yemen on January 12 will likely prove insufficient to deter further attacks. The combined strikes by aircraft, warships, and submarines against 60 targets at 16 locations marked an important shift from a purely reactive, defensive posture toward a more offensive stance to degrade the capabilities of the Houthis. However, the strikes were too limited to achieve their stated purpose of “degrading” Houthi capabilities—they surely retain a sufficient arsenal to continue their attacks.

Coalition military efforts should instead seek to deter Houthi attacks by imposing costs greater than the benefits the terrorist group achieves by disrupting global shipping. This will require conducting more frequent, deadlier, and damaging strikes against Houthi, Iranian regime, and other proxy operational leaders and command-and-control center targets that undermines their ability to exert power over territory in the Middle East.

What Happened?

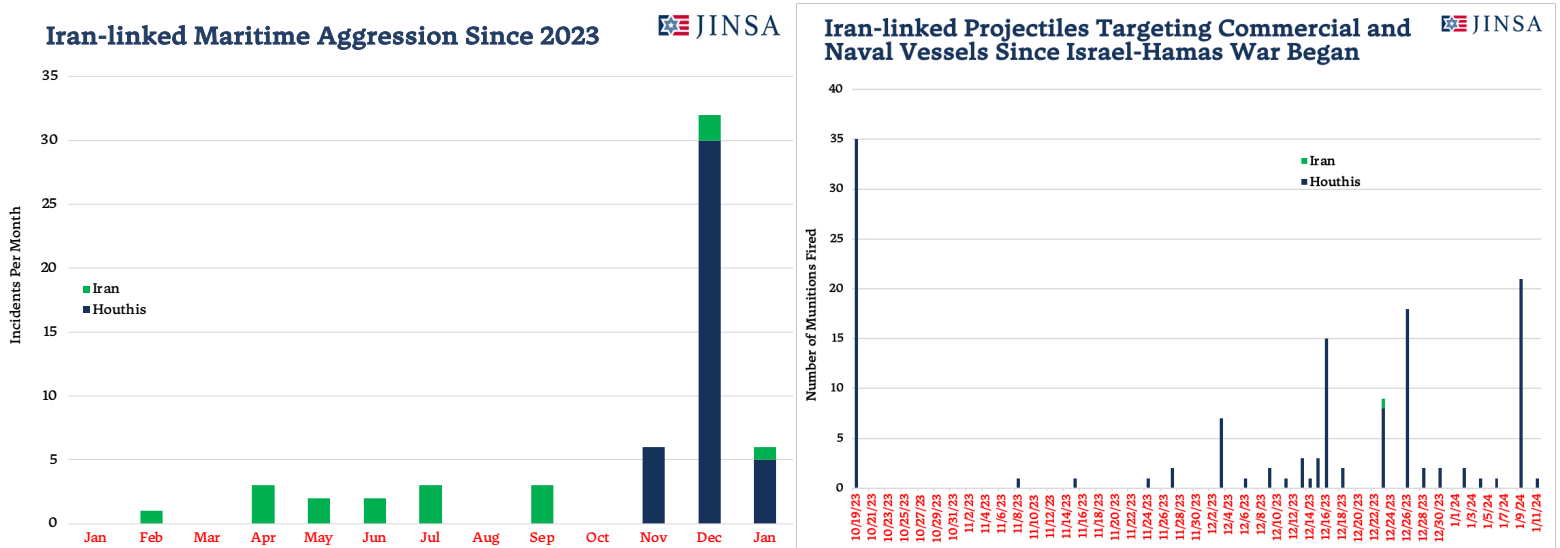
- At 2:30 am local time on January 12, American and British aircraft, along with U.S. warships and submarines, “executed deliberate strikes on over 60 targets at 16 Iranian-backed Houthi militant locations, including command and control nodes, munitions depots, launching systems, production facilities, and air defense radar systems,” in Yemen according to a [statement](#) from U.S. Air Forces Central Commander Lt. Gen. Alex Grynkewich.
 - » President Biden’s [statement](#) about the strikes indicated that they were a “direct response to unprecedented Houthi attacks against international maritime vessels in the Red Sea—including the use of anti-ship ballistic missiles for the first time in history.”
 - » U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) said that the [objective](#) of the strikes was “to degrade their capability to continue their illegal and reckless attacks on U.S. and international vessels and commercial shipping in the Red Sea.
 - » According to the Houthis, the strikes [killed](#) five people and wounded six.
- During a [speech](#) on January 11, Houthi leader Abdul Malek Al-Houthi said that any U.S. attack on Yemen “will not go unanswered,” and warned that the response will be “much more” than attacking ships at sea.



Source: Houthi leaders

Source: [The Washington Post](#)

- » After the American and British strikes on January 12, United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) received reports of a missile landing 400-500 meters away from a ship sailing ninety nautical miles southeast of Aden, Yemen. Three small watercrafts also reportedly followed the vessel.
- On at least 40 occasions since the Israel-Hamas war began, the Iran-backed Houthis have seized or attempted to seize commercial vessels and launched missiles and drones at ships in Middle Eastern waterways.
 - » The Houthis in Yemen have launched at least 131 missiles and drones and at least one missile has originated from Iranian territory since the Israel-Hamas war began.



Why Is It Important?

- After at least 40 Iran-backed attacks on ships in the Red Sea, the January 12 strikes against Houthi targets were necessary, albeit overdue. Yet, the strikes will likely prove insufficient to prevent the group from launching further attacks.
 - » U.S. statements identified the purpose of the strikes as degrading Houthi capabilities to launch maritime attacks. Yet, the strikes were not large enough to destroy all, or even likely most, of the Houthis’ arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles as well as drones. Merely degrading some, but leaving intact other, Houthi capabilities will not prevent the terrorist group from remaining able to launch more attacks.
 - » Instead of degrading capabilities, coalition military efforts should focus on deterring further Houthi attacks. This requires imposing overwhelming and intolerable costs on the group and its Iranian benefactors.
 - » Given the low cost of Houthi attacks and the immense consequences to the global economy, as well as the credibility of the United States and its partners, imposing deterrent costs requires conducting more frequent, deadlier, and damaging strikes against Houthi, Iranian regime, and other proxy leaders and command-and-control centers that undermines their ability to exert power over territory in the Middle East.
 - » “Deterring and degrading the ability of the Iranian regime and the Houthis to launch these attacks requires consistent and strong military strikes against the Houthi fighters in

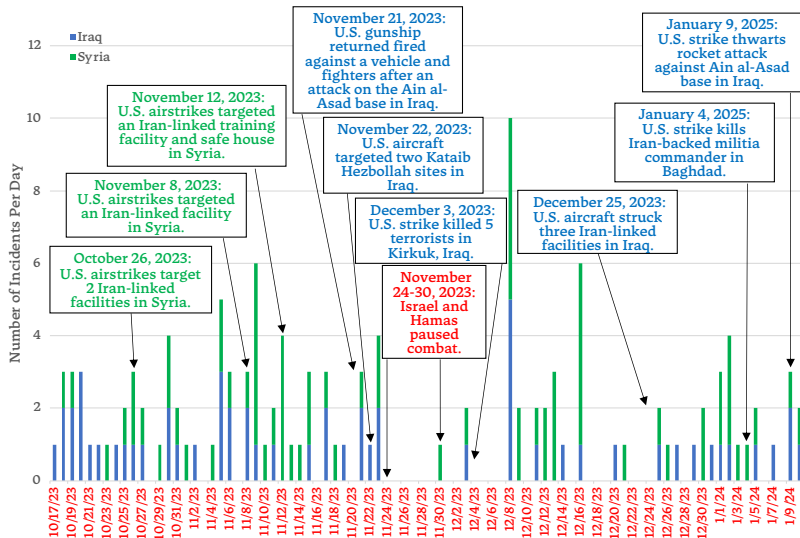
Yemen responsible for conducting them,” as VADM Mark Fox, USN (ret.), VADM John W. Miller, USN (ret.) and Ari Cicurel recently argued in [Breaking Defense](#).

- The U.S. statements about the strikes indicated the military response was about degrading Houthi capabilities, did not mention deterrence against further attacks, and sent an inconsistent message about Iran’s culpability for the Houthis’ attacks.
 - » While the statements from the [U.S. Department of Defense](#) and [U.S. Central Command](#) noted Iran’s connection to the Houthis, the White House [statement](#) avoided mentioning Iran. By avoiding mentioning Tehran’s ultimate responsibility for the Houthis' aggression, the White House undermined the deterrent message of its strikes.
 - The Houthis would not be able to conduct strikes without the funding, weaponry, and logistical support of the Iranian regime.
 - » When asked about possible further strikes against the Houthis, Britain's armed forces minister James Heappey [said](#), “there are none immediately planned, and that’s an important point. Last night was a limited, proportionate, necessary response.”
- On January 3, the United States, the United Kingdom and eleven other nations released a [statement](#) that officials described as a final warning demanding the Houthis stop attacking ships or “bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and free flow of commerce in the region’s critical waterways.”
 - » The Houthis then conducted at least five attacks, including their largest attack, involving eighteen drones, two cruise missiles, and an anti-ship ballistic missile at ships in the Red Sea on January 9.
 - » Reflecting the growing international concern with the Houthi attacks, a multinational coalition of Australia, Bahrain, Canada, and the Netherlands also provided support for the American and British strikes on January 12.
- Commensurate with longstanding U.S. policy, the Biden administration has [committed](#), in its most recent National Security Strategy, to “not allow foreign or regional powers to jeopardize freedom of navigation through the Middle East’s waterways, including the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al Mandab.”
 - » However, the failure to stop increasing Houthi aggression against Red Sea shipping, not only undermines the credibility of this commitment to freedom of navigation in the Middle East, but globally. Given the fungibility of credibility and deterrence, its failure to uphold freedom of navigation also undermines its other commitments, including to partners and allies globally.
 - » Iran-backed Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have had a measurable impact on global commerce.
 - BP and five important shipping companies, French CMA CGM, Danish Maersk, German Hapag-Lloyd, Hong Kong-based OOCL, and the Italian-Swiss-owned Mediterranean Shipping Company, the world’s largest shipping company temporarily [suspended](#) their travel through the Red Sea.
 - Egyptian revenue from the Suez Canal is [down 40%](#) from the beginning of the year compared to 2023, canal authority head Osama Rabi. The canal is a critical source of revenue for Egypt, so any long-term disruption to shipping through the Red Sea would be disastrous for the Egyptian economy.
 - The benchmark Shanghai Containerized Freight Index was up over 16% week over week to 2,206 points on January 12, according to ship broker [Clarksons](#), and rates

for the Shanghai to Europe route rose 8.1% to \$3,103 per twenty-foot equivalent unit (TEU) over the same period. The rate for containers to the U.S. West Coast rose 43.2% week over week to \$3,974 per forty-foot-equivalent-unit (FEU).

- While the Department of Defense [announced](#) on December 18 the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian, a new multinational security initiative to protect shipping in the Red Sea, this continued the United States' reactive, defensive posture that imposed almost no costs on the Houthis and did not deter further attacks.
 - » Since the December 18 announcement, the Houthis have conducted at least 18 attacks against maritime targets, including launching at least 59 missiles and drones.
 - » Previously established, U.S.-led task forces with a mandate for international security in the Red Sea, such as Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 for security in the Gulf of Oman and Indian Ocean and CTF 153 for Red Sea security, have been unsuccessful at deterring and preventing Iran-backed maritime attacks. Merely duplicating these past efforts is unlikely to yield a different result.
- As JINSA has previously [noted](#), historically, U.S. commitments to response to Iranian aggression—if backed up with credible threats of force—have yielded substantive changes to the Iranian regime's behavior.
 - » In 2011-2012, Iran quickly backed down from its threats to close the Strait of Hormuz after the Obama administration [declared](#) a strait closure to be a “red line” and sent a carrier strike group through the strait.
 - » During the Iran-Iraq War, in 1988, the United States [used force](#) against Iranian naval ships that were harassing and attacking ships in the Arabian Gulf, including sinking an Iranian frigate, a missile boat, three speedboats, and two oil platforms. Iran ceased its malign naval activity after the strong U.S. display of force.
 - » As VADM Mark Fox (ret.), former deputy commander of U.S. Central Command, [observed](#) in a recent JINSA webinar, “what changed Iranian behavior in the 1980s? Well, we caught them mining and we sank a number of their vessels ... the U.S. and our friends need to be thinking a new and different way, and sometimes we should be taking actions that impose tremendous costs.”
- The Houthi attacks against maritime targets are part of a broader breakdown in deterrence against the Iranian regime and its proxies since Hamas launched the October 7 terrorist attacks against Israel. The failure to deter the Houthi attacks at sea has indicated a lack of U.S. willingness to protect its interests in the Middle East.
 - » In addition to its aggression at sea, the Houthis have launched at least seven missiles and drones at Israel since the Israel-Hamas war began.
 - » Given Iran's large proxy network throughout the Middle East, the United States and its partners should expect retaliatory strikes, in particular in Iraq and Syria, where Iran-backed militias have conducted over 131 attacks on U.S. personnel since October 17.
 - Yet, the United States has only conducted nine rounds of strikes against these groups and has indicated a reticence to escalate, encouraging further attacks.

Iran-backed Attacks Against U.S. Personnel in Iraq and Syria Since the Start of the Israel-Hamas War



What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States and its partners should continue launching increasingly frequent, deadly, and destructive strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen so long as the Iran-backed group attacks ships or other interests in the Middle East.
 - » Beyond degrading the Houthis' missiles and drone arsenals that it uses to launch attacks against ships in the Red Sea, coalition efforts should focus on targeting operational leaders and command-and-control centers that the terrorist group uses to maintain power over western Yemen.
- The United States should stop signaling a reluctance to respond to Iran-backed attacks with force and should update its messaging around these attacks to better reflect its commitment to upholding the principle of freedom of navigation and convey a willingness to use kinetic action if necessary.
- The U.S. Department of Defense should prepare for ensuing Iran-backed attacks by the Houthis in Yemen, Iran-backed militia in Iraq and Syria, as well as the Iranian regime's military forces.
 - » U.S. Central Command should ensure that it has sufficient force protection measures, including air defenses and strike capabilities, ready to thwart Iran-backed attacks.