

Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Middle East Subcommittee

Countering Houthi Terrorism: Protecting US Interests and Security in the Red Sea

Allison Minor
Director for Middle East Integration
The Atlantic Council

September 1, 2026

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on this topic.

The Houthi threat is not new, but it has expanded considerably over the past decade, threatening stability in Yemen and the Gulf, as well as global commerce through the Red Sea. In fact, Houthi threats to shipping in the Bab-el-Mandeb provided a model for Iranian actions in the Strait of Hormuz. Now, with the Red Sea blockade the Houthis announced in late July, the group is threatening to take roughly four million barrels per day of oil off the markets at a time when global energy supplies are already strained.

The United States should mount a sustained effort to address Houthi threats, or they will continue to grow. I have worked on Yemen for much of the past decade, including at the National Security Council, the State Department, and USAID. During that period, I have witnessed how resilient the Houthis are to airstrikes and sanctions, how open-ended conflict tends to strengthen the group, and how the vulnerabilities and divisions within both the Yemen government and the Coalition backing it are among the Houthis' greatest sources of strength.

The best way to contain Houthi threats is for the United States to forge a coordinated strategy with regional and Yemeni partners to secure a negotiated settlement to the Yemen conflict. That settlement must hold the Houthis accountable to both Yemenis and their neighbors. Such a settlement is the only way to durably protect a critical maritime corridor, contain Iranian and other malign influence, and avoid continual, costly US military interventions.

This will take time, but it need not require significant taxpayer dollars – just sustained US engagement. There are three steps the United States can take now to get back on track toward this goal: **1) prevent another open-ended war; 2) resume humanitarian assistance and support to the Yemen government; 3) and restore intensive US diplomatic efforts on Yemen.**

Learning from the past

Over the past ten years, the United States has attempted several different approaches to countering the threats posed by the Houthis. These have included partner-led ground and air campaigns, a US-led air campaign, aggressive sanctions, and US and partner interdiction efforts. None of these approaches eliminated Houthi threats. Instead, both Houthi capabilities and Houthi ambitions grew substantially.

Between 2015 and 2022, the Saudi-led Coalition mounted an aggressive ground and air campaign and enforced an arms embargo on Houthi-controlled ports in Yemen. Despite this, Houthi capabilities grew substantially. By 2022, the group had transformed from a local militia into a sophisticated military force with drones capable of reaching over [2,000 km](#) and missiles capable of striking nearly 1,500 km, putting almost all of the Middle East in their sights. By this point, the Houthis were also increasingly [producing](#) weapons locally rather than relying on fully assembled weapons from Iran.

US and Israeli airstrikes against the Houthis following the launch of their Red Sea campaign in 2023 exacted significant costs on the Houthis but failed to eliminate their capabilities or curb their intent to target commercial shipping. While the Trump administration announced a ceasefire with the Houthis in May 2025, the group continued attacks on commercial shipping, including sinking two [ships](#) in July 2025. Renewed Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping over the past two months demonstrate that the Houthis intend to continue to wield this tool.

The US campaign against the Houthis has also produced unintended consequences. The Houthis' ability to withstand US and Israeli strikes has elevated the group's standing both inside Yemen and within the Axis of Resistance. This fueled Houthi [recruitment](#) efforts and their growing collaboration with armed groups across the Middle East and in the Horn of Africa. Further, it spurred Russia to deepen its cooperation with the Houthis. According to [reporting](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*, Moscow began providing the Houthis with targeting information on ships in 2024, after the United States launched operations against the group. Russia also reportedly considered sending the Houthis advanced weapons.

How to contain Houthi threats

There is no simple solution to the threat the Houthis pose to freedom of navigation, regional powers, or to Yemenis themselves. The proliferation of cheap precision weapons, diversified supply chains, a deeply repressive Houthi regime, and a [diffuse](#) network of armed groups exchanging expertise and weapons has progressively undermined the effectiveness of traditional US and partner military and sanctions tools. It has also made the Houthis more resilient to any disruptions in support from Iran. This is not to say there is no role for military tools against the Houthis, but rather that the use of military tools against the Houthis without a clear and credible objective has repeatedly proven counterproductive.

The Houthis thrive in a wartime environment. Their control inside Yemen is fueled by foreign military intervention in the country. A comprehensive settlement to the Yemen conflict that deprives the Houthis of this fuel is the best way to contain Houthi threats. That settlement must not be a simple concession to Houthi demands: it must provide a viable structure for Yemen's governance while creating enforceable constraints on Houthi cross-border attacks and threats to maritime shipping.

Securing such a settlement will not be quick or easy. But as the Houthis ramp up their attacks and Yemen teeters on the brink of renewed war, the United States must work with regional partners to craft a new strategy for reaching a comprehensive political settlement. With the broader regional balance of power in flux in the wake of the Iran war, such a strategy is needed more now than ever.

While US military and sanctions tools have failed to alter the Houthis' underlying strategy or eliminate their capabilities, one US strategy has borne results: intensive US diplomatic engagement with regional partners to resolve the conflict. In 2021, the Biden administration appointed Tim Lenderking as US Special Envoy for Yemen, and I had the honor to serve as his deputy. The experience of the Saudi-led Coalition leading up to that point provided three valuable lessons: First, an open-ended conflict tends to favor the Houthis. Second, the lack of agreement within the Coalition on a credible end state undermines the Coalition both in war and in negotiations. And third, one of the Houthis' greatest sources of strength is the weakness of the Yemen government.

US efforts sought to address all three of those lessons: We worked with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the Yemen government to build consensus around an approach for resolving the conflict. We worked with the UN to develop off-ramps for negotiations. And we worked with partners to ramp up support to the Yemen government. In April 2022, these efforts succeeded: The United States helped the UN secure a truce between the Houthis and the Yemen government, putting both Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and offensives inside the country on pause. While the United States cannot dictate outcomes in Yemen, this experience demonstrated how sustained US diplomatic engagement can be a force multiplier and help regional and Yemeni parties seize windows of opportunity.

That truce was not enough. It provided four years of relative calm inside Yemen and between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, but it did not curb Houthi ambitions. Negotiations on a roadmap agreement to reach a comprehensive political settlement continued into 2023, but the US and Saudi posture suggested we were more focused on keeping the conflict calm than ending it. Gradually, the Houthis escalated their demands, while the Coalition and international community failed to respond to Houthi violations of their commitments. Ultimately, the Houthis chose to sacrifice the roadmap for their regional ambitions: In 2023, the Houthis launched a new campaign against Red Sea shipping, derailing negotiations on the roadmap. The conflict has been in a no-war, no-peace limbo ever since.

Securing a comprehensive settlement that constrains Houthi threats will take time, but there are three steps the United States can take now to get back on track:

First, the United States must work to prevent another open-ended war inside Yemen while resisting calls to participate in a new campaign to militarily defeat the Houthis. There is no durable military solution to the Yemen conflict, and direct US involvement in a maximalist military campaign risks embroiling the United States in yet another forever war.

Additionally, direct US military involvement risks further internationalizing the Yemen conflict in ways that will both make the conflict harder to resolve and further bolster the Houthis. After US involvement spurred new cooperation between the Houthis and Russia in 2024, it was Saudi [pressure](#) on Moscow that helped prevent Russia from sending the Houthis advanced weapons. As Saudi Arabia and Ukraine deepen their [defense cooperation](#), Moscow may be less inclined to heed Riyadh's requests to moderate its relationship with the Houthis. In this way, direct US involvement could transform Yemen into a new platform for Russia to expand its influence in the Middle East—but this time that platform would be on a major maritime chokepoint.

It may be too late to stop the latest round of escalation in the Yemen conflict. But Washington should work with its partners to ensure that escalation does not turn into yet another open-ended conflict. The Coalition's approach in 2021 is instructive in this regard: In mid-2021, the Houthis walked away from negotiations and launched a major offensive on Yemen's oil-rich province of Marib. The Coalition and Yemen government mounted a unified response to that offensive, but the campaign was a limited one focused on getting the Houthis back to the negotiating table. Any military response to the Houthis now should be carried out with a similar goal in mind: to defend against Houthi attacks and create leverage, not to substitute for a political solution.

Second, the United States should resume humanitarian assistance and support to the internationally recognized Yemen government.

The best way to counter the Houthis inside Yemen is to demonstrate that there is a more effective alternative to the Houthis' repressive rule. The United States should work with regional partners to help the Yemen government improve its capacity to provide basic services and economic stability. Limited US support to the Yemen government can have a strategic impact without straining scarce US assistance resources. For example, US [capacity building](#) for the Yemen Ministry of Finance and Central Bank played a critical role in the government's economic stabilization efforts in recent years, helping to curb inflation, combat corruption, and stabilize Yemen's foreign exchange rate. These efforts both improve the lives of Yemenis and send a powerful political signal.

US support to the Yemen government also provides one of the most effective approaches to constraining Houthi weapons flows. The Yemen government is [best placed](#) to crack down on the smuggling networks in and around Yemen that the Houthis continue to rely on for weapons material. Moreover, the government has demonstrated its increasing effectiveness, with four significant [interdictions](#) over the past year. These successes were in part due to US support to the Yemeni Coast Guard over the past several years. Increasing US support to the Yemen government through the [Yemen Maritime Security Partnership](#) would provide an effective and efficient means of stemming Houthi weapons flows while building the capacity of state institutions.

Finally, [more than five million](#) people in Yemen government-controlled areas are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. The World Food Program (WFP) is currently able to reach only about

half of those people due to resource constraints. In-kind, Title II US food assistance alone could fill this gap, helping mitigate a dire crisis while benefiting American farmers. Unfortunately, the United States cut all humanitarian assistance to Yemen last year, including Title II assistance.

Third, the United States should renew diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict, including by appointing a new US special envoy for Yemen. Washington's actions alone cannot bring the conflict to an end. But the United States has an important role to play, particularly by helping build consensus among US partners in the region on a strategy for resolving the conflict. In the absence of US diplomatic engagement with regional partners on Yemen, we have seen growing fissures between US partners that the Houthis are well-placed to exploit.

In December 2025, fighting erupted between Saudi and UAE-backed factions within the Yemen government, and Saudi forces struck a UAE weapons shipment arriving in Yemen. The confrontation deepened a dangerous rift between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, leading the UAE to withdraw its troops from Yemen. Since then, reforms within the Yemen government combined with renewed Saudi financial support have buoyed hopes for a more unified and effective Yemen government. But the nature of the confrontation created serious vulnerabilities. It remains unclear whether troops associated with the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) would fight on behalf of the Yemen government should the ground war in Yemen resume, and there are reports that the Houthis are already seeking to cut a deal with the STC to undermine the Yemen government.

Yemen is a civil conflict that has become deeply entangled in regional competition. Building consensus among US regional partners and bridging divides between their Yemeni partners is a critical first step toward countering Houthi aggression and ultimately resolving the conflict. Attempts to skip this step have repeatedly failed, and they will likely continue to do so. The United States is uniquely placed to help build the consensus needed to make progress. Doing so is not costly for the American taxpayer: all it requires is empowering American diplomats and exercising US convening power. Unlike a bilateral ambassador, a Yemen special envoy is charged with engaging leadership of all regional partners around a defined mission. Unfortunately, the Trump administration eliminated the Yemen envoy, and the United States does not even have an ambassador to Yemen, Saudi Arabia, or the UAE.

The war in Yemen is not the United States' war, and we should not make it ours. But its consequences will continue to reverberate across the region and beyond. Instead of vacillating between costly US military interventions and disengagement, we should pursue sustained, strategic engagement with our regional and Yemeni partners to help them build a credible path toward resolving the conflict.