



**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee
on Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia**

***“A Strategic Approach
to Red Sea Security”***

A Testimony by:

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Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Connolly, distinguished members of the subcommittee, I am honored to share my views with you on this hearing entitled, “Iran’s Proxy in Yemen: The Houthi Threat to Middle East Stability, Global Shipping, and U.S. Servicemembers.” CSIS does not take policy positions, so the views represented in this testimony are my own and not those of my employer. In my testimony, I would like to lay out a strategic approach to Red Sea security.

The Houthis are a paradox. A rag-tag military operating on a shoestring budget, which doesn’t even represent a state, should not be a difficult adversary for the most powerful military in the world. Similarly, it should be easy for the United States to build a broad military coalition to protect freedom of navigation through seas that carry about 20 percent of global container trade and is a key conduit of both energy and manufactured goods to Europe. And yet, here we are, with Houthi forces continually threatening global shipping, and the United States working principally with UK partners to strike at Houthi targets, while regional allies and NATO partners keep their distance.

There is a way to see the Houthis mostly as a function of Iran’s malevolence and regional mischief-making. Some call for robust U.S. military strikes on Iran to punish the Iranian government for all of its destabilizing regional actions. Some call for crushing the Houthis completely. I understand the attraction of the logic of asserting U.S. military power and decisively deterring our adversaries. Yet, doing so without clear forethought would actually advance Iranian goals rather than U.S. ones, and they wouldn’t do much to stabilize Yemen. Deterrence, after all, requires a lot more than military might. It requires understanding the motivations, goals, preferences, and perceptions of one’s adversaries. It also requires an ability to assure those adversaries that if their behavior improves, their conditions will improve as well. Most fundamentally, the way deterrence works is it provokes our adversaries to make political choices.

Too often when we talk about deterrence, we really mean compellence. We see it as a military task with military outcomes. Compellence is much harder than deterrence because it requires public concessions that have political costs that governments are often loath to pay. Often, they calculate that they are better off absorbing our military hits and rallying the public around the flag than looking weak to their people. When we fall into the trap of escalating without success, we advance our adversaries’ political agenda despite degrading their military capabilities. In the process, we get no closer to changing the behavior we are seeking to reform.

Let me begin by discussing the Houthis. They are a robust, battle-tested guerilla force based in the highlands of Northern Yemen that has been fighting the Yemeni and Saudi governments for much of the last two decades. Their supporters are for the most part poor and deeply alienated, and they complain that their cultural mores are being destroyed by a combination of cosmopolitan elites and Saudi-inspired religious revivalists, both of whom work at the behest of foreign powers. The Yemeni highlands have a long history of enthusiasm for weapons and marksmanship, and tribal militias and other security forces have been an important part of their identity for many years. Some of the Houthis’ sentiments should not seem foreign to us.

As the Yemeni government began to crumble in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Houthis spread decisively out of the North and at one point seemed poised to seize the entire country.

Yemen has a mosaic of tribes and sectarian affiliations (as well as a significant and diverse non-tribal population), but the Houthis were able to co-opt and coerce large areas, and they now rule over more than 70 percent of Yemen's population.

The Houthis' revenues come from a combination of war profiteering, racketeering, smuggling, and taxation. Rather than build the national economy of Yemen, they have further immiserated it.

Iran did not create the Houthi movement, but it has long seen it as useful. In part, supporting the Houthis was a way to torment Saudi Arabia, which the Iranians have long seen as their principal regional challenge. A secure Saudi Arabia could turn its attention to Iran, but one that was preoccupied with challenges from Yemen—as Saudi Arabia has been off and on for many decades—would need to disperse its energies. In addition, Iranian investments in the Houthis gave Iran leverage in their dealings with Saudi Arabia. The Houthis, for their part, had their own longstanding grievances with Saudi Arabia and were delighted to have an external patron.

Iranian support for the Houthis is relatively new, however, and it is largely opportunistic. When the Houthi insurgency began 20 years ago and targeted both the Yemeni and Saudi governments, it did not enjoy significant Iranian support. As a sporadic insurgency morphed into a civil war, the Houthis took Sana'a in 2015. They also did this without significant Iranian support, although their success did prompt Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to unleash what he promised would be a quick and decisive strike against them. In practice, this was neither quick nor decisive. The Iranians only started intervening in a serious way in 2017, after the Houthis had independently established both their bona fides and their ability to strike back at the Saudis. That aid has included both ballistic missiles and drones.

For Iran, the Houthis have never been a core interest like Iraq or Syria, or a multi-billion-dollar investment like the one Iran has made in Hezbollah. Instead, the Houthis have been a low-cost way to give Iran additional regional reach. They represent a modest investment in regional forces that reject the legitimacy of the status quo. Qassem Soleimani, the former head of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), helped develop the idea of Iran building an "Axis of Resistance" in the Middle East. To a great extent, this wasn't about extending Iranian control throughout the region. Instead, the idea was that with lesser funds and looser control, Iran could extend its influence everywhere. Because it is easier to destroy than to build, and because it is easier to influence than control, Iran's strategy was aligned with its constrained resources. As I read it, the message Iran was seeking to send is that if Iran does not feel secure, no one else will feel secure, either.

In this context, consider the Iranians' and the Houthis' strategic goals here. The Iranians' are much more expansive. They are seeking to become a more prominent regional power. To achieve that, they believe the U.S. presence in the region needs to be reduced. Of course, Iran's regional ambitions persuade regional countries they need the United States to stay. Here we are seeing the Iranian strategy coming into focus.

A large part of Iran's strategy is increasing hostility to the U.S. regional presence in the region itself. That means both capitalizing on regional hostility to U.S. military support for Israel, and also persuading governments and publics alike that the United States is a wantonly violent and

militarily ineffective power that brings chaos rather than stability to the Middle East. Investing in proxy forces that provoke U.S. reprisals is part of this.

Iran has also invested in ensuring that Iraq did not become either a political inspiration for the region or a base from which the United States could project power. It has also invested in relatively modest attacks on U.S. partners that fall below the threshold of eliciting U.S. reprisals, but which are attributable to Iran. This causes many neighbors to question the value of U.S. support, and to find ways to placate Iran. Of course, Iran aligns its messaging criticizing purported U.S. hegemony with both Russia and China, who have their own reasons to increase resistance to the U.S. military presence in the Middle East.

Undermining U.S. domestic support for Middle East deployments is also part of Iran's strategy. It seeks to draw the United States into a new series of diverse, dispersed, and open-ended military engagements in the Middle East that have no obvious end point or condition of victory. In the wake of the Iraq war and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran is betting that the U.S. public has little appetite for another extended U.S. military engagement in the Middle East.

The Houthis have a somewhat narrower set of ambitions. They are poised to gain increased power in Yemen, and they believe that the Saudi effort to extract itself from an almost nine-year-old war will deliver Saudi aid and recognition. They think that demonstrating their military capabilities, as well as their willingness to strike militarily, enhances their negotiating leverage with Saudi Arabia and increases their value to Iran, their significant external patron.

From a domestic perspective, Yemenis feel genuine sympathy for the Palestinians. The Houthis appearing to take action in solidarity with the Palestinians doesn't actually help the Palestinians in any way, but it does help the Houthis. It puts the public focus in Yemen on warfighting (where the Houthis are relatively skillful) rather than governance (where they are not). Anti-Houthi protests were escalating in September, and the Houthis had begun large-scale arrests of peaceful protestors. Rallying the public to support their defense of Palestinians moves the discourse to where the Houthis are more comfortable. In addition, presenting themselves as a worthy adversary of the United States enhances their prestige, portraying them as both strong and fearless.

For the United States, the bad options are more numerous than the good ones. In fact, it isn't clear there are any good ones.

Both Iran and the Houthis are playing a long game. The Iranians want Americans to tire of the Middle East, and they want the region to tire of the United States. The Houthis want everyone to tire of them and just give in. From the perspective of American policy, the Houthis consider our four-year presidential terms to be fleeting, and they are looking at decades of consolidated rule. They feel they can afford to hold on for years, because their expected payoff will last decades. American administrations want to solve problems and move on, often in just a few years. Both are keen to wait out the United States.

Each also benefits from low expectations for success vis-à-vis the United States. Their mere survival is a victory, and if 1 percent of their strikes are successful—such as Iranian-backed forces' recent attack on Tower 22 in Jordan—they consider it a great achievement.

They are both willing to strike out at any number of soft civilian targets—from commercial shipping to infrastructure—and they attack adversaries who have more to lose than they do. The Houthis in particular have little of value that can be held at risk. They have operated out of makeshift facilities for decades, and they have adjusted to life without sufficient food, running water, and electricity. Almost a decade of Saudi assaults has made them practiced at hiding their assets and moving quickly. They present a very small target space and setting them back is hard. They are expert at requiring their adversaries to use expensive weapons to disable their cheap ones.

It is an understandable impulse to simply use superior intelligence and firepower to push back on Iran and eliminate the Houthi threat decisively. This was the impetus behind Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's decision to attack Yemen in 2015, soon supported by the UAE. Paradoxically, these countries' assaults failed to push the Houthis from power, but they did significantly deepen Iranian-Houthi cooperation. Having fought the Houthis since then, they are eager for an exit from the war.

Yemen is widely understood to be the world's worst humanitarian crisis, and because much of Yemen's humanitarian suffering is in areas under Houthi control, the Houthis exploit their people's suffering by directing some aid shipments to allies, blocking some from adversaries, and taxing and pilfering from what gets through. The numbers are staggering. Something on the order of 400,000 Yemenis have died during this decade-long civil war. About half of Yemen's population of 34 million is severely food insecure, and 6 million are on the brink of famine. 5 million children and 1.3 million pregnant and lactating women are expected to require treatment for severe malnutrition this year. 4.5 million people have been displaced. The international humanitarian community remains deeply engaged.

It seems to me that the recent designation of the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group does several useful things. One is to impose penalties on the Houthis while making clear that harsher penalties could be forthcoming. The second is that it allows humanitarian organizations a little more freedom without the worry that any contact with the Houthis—who after all, are the prevailing authorities in much of the country—will result in crippling U.S. penalties.

Despite the despair in Yemen, there has been some progress. A truce that took effect in April 2022 has largely held, providing increased security for civilians. Negotiations between the Saudis, the government of Yemen, and the Houthis have made some progress, although it remains tentative. I hear consistent reports that both the Saudis and the Iranians fear that violence in Yemen could spin out of control and threaten their long-term interests, and they are keen to avoid it.

But the United States faces at least five threats in Yemen. The first is that the United States actually boosts the Houthis when they demonstrate resilience after comprehensive U.S. effort to destroy their capabilities. This plays into a narrative that their mere survival represents a victory. There is little question in my mind that the United States does not have the interest, will, or intention to push the Houthis from power, nor should we. But we may be helping the Houthis present themselves as among the fiercest and most resilient fighters in the Middle East.

The second is that the United States glides down a slippery slope of increased military engagement in Yemen that is divorced from the scale of U.S. interests there. I am not thinking that Yemen will be “our Vietnam”—which, parenthetically, Yemen became for Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt in the 1960s, when he deployed about 70,000 soldiers to Yemen in the 1960s to unsuccessfully put his thumb on the scale of an earlier Yemeni civil war. Instead, I worry that this moment will be part of a long cycle of U.S. engagement in and disengagement from Yemen.

The United States has alternately been deeply involved in counterterrorism and deradicalization efforts, only to shift its focus in a few short years and abandon Yemen to the forces of terrorism and radicalization, before it needs to intervene again. It is no secret that weapons we have supplied to Yemeni forces have been sold around the Middle East and used against U.S. troops in Iraq and elsewhere and have also bolstered the Houthis’ arsenals. It is also no secret that some of the forces fighting the Houthis have their own unsavory history and ties to jihadi groups. When I worked on Capitol Hill in the late 1980s, our support for the Taliban seemed to many to be a masterstroke because it tormented the Soviets in Afghanistan. There is less of a consensus today that our previous support for the Taliban is an experiment we should continue to replicate.

The third danger is that the United States precipitates an even greater humanitarian disaster in Yemen, or is perceived to do so. While the Houthis bear full responsibility for Yemenis’ misery, I could see circumstances in which the United States is accused of instigating the spread of famine and disease in Yemen, with Iran, Russia, China, and some regional media amplifying the message.

The fourth is that it falls into an Iranian trap, sucked into a grinding, open-ended conflict in the region that continues to put U.S. troops at risk without increasing regional security, and which ultimately undermines both the region’s and the American public’s willingness to sustain the U.S. military presence. The costs to Iran of pursuing this strategy are modest, and their timeframe is long. They doubt that we have either the will or the patience to prevail.

The fifth is that the battle in Yemen deepens the rift between the United States and partner militaries. It is both remarkable and worrying that key NATO allies and key regional allies want no public association with any military operations in Yemen, and about half of the 22-member defensive coalition want to do so secretly. While I will leave it to these governments to explain their decision making, no one can consider it sustainable when the United States is one of only a handful of countries willing to fight to defend public goods, and when close partners seek to benefit from U.S. actions without contributing to them. That is, of course, the world that many of our adversaries in the Middle East and around the world would like to see, and I could imagine U.S. military action in Yemen hastening its realization.

The option of striking Iran directly appeals to many, and I accept that the risk of sharp escalation from Iran is modest. While it has threatened to do so, Iran has not exacted retribution for the assassination of former Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, although several former U.S. officials have enduring U.S. government-provided protection because of credible and persistent Iranian threats against their safety.

Yet, Iran’s strategic response to the Soleimani assassination under President Raisi has proven disappointingly successful. Iran has abandoned efforts to engage the United States, it has deepened

its ties with Russia and China, it has improved its relations with its immediate neighbors, and it has enhanced the capabilities of the so-called “Axis of Resistance,” in part by giving these groups greater freedom to pursue their agendas than they had under Soleimani while remaining strategically aligned with Iran. In my assessment, the previous U.S. policy of “maximum pressure” did not work and was not poised to work even if it had more time. Instead, it transformed what was a broad and cooperative international effort against the Iran nuclear program into a bilateral confrontation between Iran and the United States that freed Iran from both constraints and supervision of its nuclear program.

My point is not that we should be soft on Iran, any more than we should be soft on the Houthis. Instead, my point is that in order to deter either one, their leaderships need to feel they have a choice, whereby one pathway provides pain while another provides relief. We are not good at providing such a choice, in part because I strongly suspect that both the Iranian government and the Houthis will be doing things that we find offensive—and that I find offensive—for many years to come. But partly, too we keep thinking that enough pressure or the right kind of pressure will flip our adversaries. In so doing, we miss two important ingredients to our own success: that they must have confidence we will relieve pressure if they behave in the ways we prescribe, and they must not feel that our pressure actually benefits them. That is harder than it seems. In the case of Iran, for example, regime insiders run the smuggling networks that circumvent U.S. sanctions and profit from them. In many cases, they fear the lifting of sanctions more than the imposition of additional ones.

We need to see this conflict as a fundamentally political issue for which we need to use military instruments, rather than a military problem with military solutions. Our goal needs to be to persuade the governments of Iran and the Houthis to make different choices, and not merely seek to defeat them on the battlefield. The Houthis in particular are deeply engaged in negotiations that will determine their future role in Yemen, and the United States has many tools to influence those talks. That, and not the firing of missiles in the Red Sea, will determine their future.

The issue is not that anyone doubts U.S. military capacity. The Iranians and the Houthis enter this battle with the firm knowledge that the U.S. military can destroy any target on the planet. And yet, they also see the U.S. military as an institution that often has struggled to achieve a clean victory over the last three-quarters of a century.

These are forces that feel that their relative weakness and the virtue of their cause justifies breaking the rules of war. They are skilled at using asymmetrical tactics, and they have positioned themselves to portray mere survival as victory. We do not fight that way. But we are overwhelmingly the stronger power, and we have things that each side believes it needs. There is a role for our military strength, but we also must understand that it is only through the other tools of statecraft that we will win.