

**HEARING BEFORE
THE UNITED STATES HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND CENTRAL ASIA**

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I. Introduction

Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Connolly, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am grateful for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Simone Ledeen, and I am a Senior Fellow at the Strauss Center for International Security and Law in Austin, Texas. I am also the Managing Director at Vantage ROI. Prior to these roles, I served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, and as the Principal Director and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism. From 2014-2016, I served as Executive Director of Standard Chartered Bank's U.S. Law Compliance Program for the Middle East, Africa, and Pakistan, and prior to that at the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Intelligence and Analysis.

The Middle East is at a pivotal moment. The region is currently embroiled in a high-stakes, multidimensional conflict fueled by Iran's calculated aggression against the United States, Israel, and our other partners and allies. The evidence is clear: the Iranian regime is sowing this discord, threatening international peace and stability. From the shadows, the regime is advancing its agenda by planning and funding attacks by its proxies which Iran also trains and equips. My focus today will be on one of these proxies, the Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah, and how the United States must respond with decisive strength to this accelerating Iranian aggression in the Middle East.

The United States' timid approach towards the Iranian regime has directly encouraged Tehran's aggression. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its affiliates have relentlessly escalated their attacks against the U.S., jeopardizing our interests and those of our partners and allies. The Biden Administration's hesitancy has placed U.S. servicemembers and crucial global trade routes at grave risk. The Administration's policy of appeasement toward the Iranian regime has proven to be a dangerous fantasy, setting the post Abraham Accords Middle East on fire. Urgent action is required. The United States must decisively undermine the Iranian Regime's ability to support its proxies, both militarily and financially. We must work closely with our partners and allies to impose significant costs on Tehran and its so-called "axis of resistance," and we must vocally back the Iranian protest movement, signaling unwavering support for the freedom and human rights of the long-oppressed Iranian people.

II. Houthis' Attacks on Global Shipping in the Red Sea Since October 2023

Since mid-November 2023, the Iranian-backed Houthi rebel group has sharply increased its attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea. These aggressive actions have severely disrupted key shipping routes, damaging the global economy. The Houthis have used drones, missiles, and small boats to target both commercial and naval vessels, threatening a critical waterway for international trade.¹ Their attacks span the Southern Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Sea.² The United States and its allies have responded by shooting down drones and missiles launched by the Houthis.³ Companies have had to reroute ships to avoid the area, leading to a surge in shipping costs and longer travel times given that they must now travel around the African coast.⁴ An estimated 12 percent of international trade, amounting to over \$1 trillion in goods annually, including a substantial portion of the world's container traffic, normally navigates through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.⁵ Freight rates for routes from East Asia to Europe have experienced a surge of more than 200 percent in the wake of the Houthi offensive.⁶

Between October 2023 and early-February 2024, the Houthis launched an alarming array of weaponry against maritime targets in the Red Sea, including:

- Cruise missiles and land attack cruise missiles, indicating a strategic capability to target both maritime and land-based assets simultaneously.⁷
- A staggering number of suicide unmanned aerial vehicles, showcasing an ability to employ drone technology for both surveillance and direct attacks.⁸

¹ *Timeline: Houthi Attacks and U.S. Responses*, United States Institute of Peace (Feb. 6, 2024), <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2024/feb/01/timeline-houthis-attacks-and-us-responses>.

² See e.g., Simon Scarr, Adolfo Arranz, Jonathan Saul, Han Huang and Jitesh Chowdhury, *Red Sea attacks*, Reuters (Feb. 2, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/ISRAEL-PALESTINIANS/SHIPPING-ARMS/lgvdnngeyvo/>; Avi Scharf, *The Full Map: All Ships Attacked by Yemen's Houthis in the Red Sea*, Haaretz (Jan. 15, 2024), <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2024-01-15/ty-article-magazine/30-attacks-all-red-sea-ships-targeted-by-the-houthis/0000018c-5df7-d6f9-afbc-5dff7a430000>.

³ See e.g., *Joint Statement from Australia, Bahrain, Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States on Additional Strikes Against the Houthis in Yemen*, U.S. Department of Defense (Feb. 3, 2024), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3665864/joint-statement-from-australia-bahrain-denmark-canada-the-netherlands-new-zeala/>.

⁴ Lori Ann LaRocco, *Red Sea crisis boosts shipping costs, delays – and inflation worries*, CNBC (Jan. 3, 2024), <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/01/03/red-sea-crisis-shipping-costs-delays-inflation.html>.

⁵ Robert Perkins, *FACTBOX: Seaborne trade reroutes away from Red Sea over Houthi attacks*, S&P Global Commodity Insights (Dec. 21, 2023), <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/shipping/122123-factbox-seaborne-trade-reroutes-away-from-red-sea-over-houthi-attacks>.

⁶ *Red Sea crisis impact on box rates more rapid than Covid-19: Xeneta analysis*, Container News (Feb. 1, 2024), <https://container-news.com/red-sea-crisis-impact-on-box-rates-more-rapid-than-covid-19-xeneta-analysis/#:~:text=Xeneta%2C%20an%20ocean%20freight%20rate,52%20days%20of%20the%20pandemic>.

⁷ *Timeline: Houthi Attacks and U.S. Responses*, United States Institute of Peace (Feb. 6, 2024), <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2024/feb/01/timeline-houthis-attacks-and-us-responses>.

⁸ Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, *Inside the Houthis' Stockpile of Iranian Weapons*, Foreign Policy Magazine (Feb. 8, 2024), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/08/yemen-houthi-iran-weapons-intelligence-report/>.

- Unmanned surface vessels, highlighting the use of innovative maritime warfare technology.⁹
- Anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), making the Houthis the first in the world to deploy ballistic missiles against ships.¹⁰

The Houthis' adoption of ASBMs marks a significant and alarming evolution in regional maritime warfare, signaling a sophisticated leap in their military capabilities, which now align with those of only a few nations. ASBMs, with their low-flying, cruise-based technologies designed for stealth and evasion, have historically been a part of only a few nations' arsenals.¹¹ Their use by the Houthis not only highlights the advanced nature of their threat to maritime security, but also illustrates the strategic depth of Iran's influence, extending its power projection far beyond its borders. By arming the Houthis with these missiles amidst a devastating civil war and humanitarian crisis, Iran has strategically enhanced its area denial capabilities, threatening vital global shipping lanes in the Southern Red Sea and the Arabian Sea. This move aims to deter the United States from intervening in regional conflicts and positions Iran as a formidable disruptor of international maritime commerce. Despite the relatively high number of attacks, the recorded hits on maritime targets have been relatively limited, highlighting the Houthis' difficulty in achieving precise hits with these more sophisticated weapons.

In concert with the relentless Houthi attacks against global shipping, Iran and its allies have been exploiting maritime navigation systems to conduct operations with relative impunity in the Red Sea, often disguising their activities under the flags of China, Iran, or Russia. The "dark fleet," enjoys a peculiar immunity from Houthi attacks, underscoring a coordinated effort that aligns with Iran's strategic interests. This fleet, comprising vessels that often turn off their transponders to obscure their locations and identities, primarily facilitate the transport of oil from sanction-hit countries like Venezuela and Iran.¹² The deliberate avoidance of these ships by Houthi forces, despite their aggressive campaign against global shipping, highlights a tacit understanding or arrangement that ensures their safety. This scenario exposes a sophisticated method to circumvent international sanctions and raises concerns about the selective enforcement of maritime security, where the "dark fleet" navigates with relative impunity.

III. Threat to Yemen, the Middle East, and U.S. Servicemembers

The Houthi movement, which has evolved into a significant threat to Yemen, the broader Middle East, and U.S. servicemembers in the region, originated from a Zaidi Shiite insurgency

⁹ See e.g., Doug G. Ware, *Houthis now using exploding drone boats to target ships, Navy commander says*, Stars and Stripes (Jan. 4, 2024), <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle-east/2024-01-04/middle-east-houthis-red-sea-boat-drones-12556543.html>.

¹⁰ See e.g., Oded Yaron, *Houthis Threaten Red Sea Shipping With Groundbreaking Iranian Missile*, Haaretz (Dec. 12, 2023), <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2023-12-12/ty-article-magazine/houthis-threaten-red-sea-shipping-with-groundbreaking-iranian-missile/0000018c-5aa4-df2f-adac-feadd7220000>.

¹¹ Sebastien Roblin, *We Might Have Just Seen the World's First Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile Attack*, Popular Mechanics (Dec. 1, 2023), <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a45964460/first-anti-ship-ballistic-missile-attack-houthi-rebels/>.

¹² Christiaan Triebert, Blacki Migliozzi, Alexander Cardia, Muye Xiao and David Botti, *Fake Signals and American Insurance: How a Dark Fleet Moves Russian Oil*, The New York Times (May 30, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/05/30/world/asia/russia-oil-ships-sanctions.html>.

challenging the Sunni Yemeni government. Over the years, and thanks in large part to its Iranian sponsorship, this group has transitioned into a formidable military force at the heart of the Yemeni Civil War that erupted in 2015. The conflict, driven by the Houthis' actions, has completely destabilized Yemen, caused a massive humanitarian crisis, and significantly complicated the strategic landscape for the United States and its allies in the Middle East. The civil war in Yemen has not only devastated the country and its people, but it has also become a proxy battleground for larger regional conflicts.

The chaos caused by the Houthis has also provided Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) with opportunities to fortify their operations. AQAP has been responsible for numerous high-profile terrorist attacks and attempts over the years including the Charlie Hebdo Attack in 2015 and the USS Cole bombing in 2000.¹³ Yemen now offers AQAP a favorable environment for training and attack-planning. Just recently, AQAP released a 9-minute video advocating for lone jihad in the West.¹⁴ The video features English narration and is presented by Khubayb al-Sudani, a figure with a \$4 million U.S. bounty on his head. The video glorifies past jihadist attacks on U.S. soil, signaling AQAP's ongoing threat to global security.

It is worth mentioning as well that the relationship between the Houthi state sponsor, Iran, and AQAP has evolved. While the support Iran has provided Shia groups is well-documented, they have also aided AQAP.¹⁵ The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have provided a safe haven for jihadist leaders. In the 1990s, an agreement was made between Osama bin Laden's team and the Iranian regime to allow for Al Qaeda members to travel through Iran and into Afghanistan.¹⁶ This provided a key passageway for Al Qaeda to move money and their fighters.¹⁷ Iran has also gone above and beyond to host specific Al Qaeda leaders. For example, Iran has harbored Sayf al-'Adl, who some consider Al-Qaeda's "de facto" leader, within their borders.¹⁸

a. Threat to Yemen

In Yemen, the Houthis have seized control of significant portions of the country, including the capital, Sana'a. Their so-called "governance" has led to widespread humanitarian crises, including famine, disease outbreaks, and massive displacement of civilians. The conflict has decimated the country's infrastructure, economy, and healthcare system, leaving millions of Yemenis in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Just this month, a Houthi-controlled court

¹³ *What Is AQAP, the Terror Group Claiming Charlie Hebdo Attack?*, ABC News (Jan. 14, 2015), <https://abcnews.go.com/International/aqap-terror-group-claiming-charlie-hebdo-attack/story?id=28223532>; *U.S. says suspected USS Cole bombing planner killed in Yemen strike*, Reuters (Jan. 6, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN1P1074/>.

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¹⁵ *U.S. Report: Iran's Support for Terrorism*, United States Institute for Peace (Mar. 30, 2023), <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/mar/30/us-report-iran's-support-terrorism#:~:text=Iranian%20forces%20have%20directly%20backed,regime%27s%20brutal%20crackdown%20in%20Syria>.

¹⁶ Maseh Zarif, *Al Qaeda's Safe Haven in Iran*, Critical Threats (July 29, 2011), <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaedas-safe-haven-in-iran>.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, *Al-Qaeda's "De Facto" Leader is Protected by Iran*, The George Washington University (Feb. 16, 2023), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/al-qaeda-de-facto-leader-sayf-al-adl>.

ordered the execution of 13 people for “homosexual acts.”¹⁹ The Houthi control over Yemen’s institutions has also created a power vacuum that has allowed terrorist organizations, such as AQAP, to maintain a foothold in the region.

b. Threat to the Middle East

The Houthi movement extends its impact far beyond Yemen’s borders, serving as a pivotal component in Iran’s broader strategy to amplify its sway and disrupt the established order throughout the Middle East. Notably, their aggressive campaigns against Saudi Arabia, characterized by missile and drone attacks on vital infrastructure and oil installations, have escalated tensions within the Gulf region, thereby endangering global oil supplies. Moreover, with a quarter of Israel’s trade occurring with Asian countries, the Houthis deliberately target the Red Sea routes, posing a significant threat to Israel’s entire supply chain. This strategic targeting reflects the Houthis’ role in Iran’s ambitions – both as a local force in Yemen and to reshape geopolitical dynamics across the Middle East.

c. Threat to United States Forces

The Houthi insurgency also poses a direct threat to U.S. servicemembers stationed in the region. The group’s access to advanced weaponry, including drones, missiles, and naval mines supplied by Iran, enables them to target U.S. military assets and personnel. The Houthis have demonstrated their willingness and capability to engage in attacks against U.S. Navy ships and to target bases in the region where U.S. forces are stationed.²⁰ These actions endanger the lives of U.S. servicemembers and complicate diplomatic efforts to stabilize the region and counter Iranian influence.

The recent drone attack in Jordan, resulting in the tragic loss of three American soldiers, highlights the threats posed by Iranian-backed proxies in the Middle East.²¹

IV. The Biden Administration’s Response and Potential for Increased Escalation

The contrast between the optimism fostered by the Abraham Accords in 2020 and the current reality could not be starker. The disappointment in the Biden Administration’s regional policy is palpable among our partners and allies. The persistent escalation of threats from Iranian-backed proxies, including the Houthis, necessitates a reevaluation of the United States’ strategy.

The Biden Administration’s current strategy of appeasement is not viable. Aggression against U.S. interests and our requirement for global freedom of navigation demand a response that is

¹⁹ *13 Sentenced To Death For Homosexuality In Yemen: Source*, Barron’s (Feb. 6, 2024), <https://www.barrons.com/news/13-sentenced-to-death-for-homosexuality-in-yemen-source-0f0dc729>.

²⁰ See e.g., *Houthis target U.S. destroyer in latest round of missile attacks; strike British merchant ship*, CBS News (Jan. 27, 2024), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/houthis-target-u-s-destroyer-carney-british-merchant-ship-missile-attacks-red-sea-gulf-of-aden/>.

²¹ *Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds a Press Briefing*, U.S. Department of Defense (Feb. 5, 2024), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3667341/pentagon-press-secretary-air-force-maj-gen-pat-ryder-holds-a-press-briefing/>.

both swift and decisive. Demonstrating such resolve is essential to deter further escalation and restore regional balance.

Recent defensive U.S. military actions against the Houthis have not stopped their attacks. The continued rerouting of shipping and the spike in insurance costs are a testament to a flawed U.S. approach. Announcing strikes in advance to avoid enemy casualties signals hesitancy and undermines the protection of the United States' interests. Appeasement has invited escalation.

The Biden Administration's early diplomatic efforts in the region, including pressuring Saudi Arabia to cease hostilities against the Houthis, delisting the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist organization in February 2021, and attempting to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, only emboldened Tehran.²² At the same time, the significant increase in Iranian oil sales in 2023 has financed the regime's aggression and proxy activities across the region.

Further, by facilitating the release of billions of dollars — notably, \$2.76 billion in debts paid by Iraq for Iranian natural gas and an additional waiver that provided Iran access to \$10 billion in electricity revenue — the Biden administration has enabled Tehran to divert more resources toward its military and proxy activities across the Middle East.²³ Under the Biden Administration's policies, even the Iranian Oil Ministry has achieved “stunning successes” according to an Iranian Member of Parliament.²⁴

According to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, since the start of the Biden Administration, Iran has successfully exported oil worth more than \$100 billion.²⁵ The United Against Nuclear Iran Tanker Tracker database found that Iran managed to sell 516 million barrels in 2023 alone.²⁶ This sales volume marks a 23 percent increase from the prior year and an 82 percent surge compared to May 2019 and January 2021, known as the “maximum pressure” era under the Trump Administration.²⁷

²² Jennifer Hansler, *Biden administration re-designates Houthis as Specially Designated Global Terrorists*, CNN (Jan. 17, 2024), <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/politics/biden-administration-houthis-global-terrorist-entity/index.html#:~:text=The%20administration%20removed%20the%20Houthis,administration%20in%20its%20final%20weeks>.

²³ *Iraq to pay \$2.76 billion in gas and electricity debt to Iran*, Reuters (June 10, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-pay-276-bln-gas-electricity-debt-iran-2023-06-10/>; *Iran Receives Access to \$10 Billion Thanks to U.S. Sanctions Waiver*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, (Nov. 15, 2023), <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/11/15/iran-receives-access-to-10-billion-thanks-to-u-s-sanctions-waiver/>.

²⁴ @EnergyIran, X (Feb. 10, 2024), <https://twitter.com/EnergyIran>.

²⁵ Saeed Ghasseminejad, *Bipartisan Coalitions Urge Biden to Resume Enforcement of Iran Oil Sanctions*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies (Feb. 5, 2024), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/05/biden-iran-sanctions-evasion-oil-exports-enforcement/#:~:text=According%20to%20domestic%20reporting%2C%20Iran's,evasion%20of%20U.S.%20extraterritorial%20sanctions>.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

Assuming Iran offers its oil at a discount of 5 to 15 percent below the Brent crude price, the regime's oil transactions in 2023 would have brought in revenue between \$36.3 billion and \$40.6 billion.²⁸ This revenue represents a staggering 187 percent rise in average monthly earnings when juxtaposed with figures from the "maximum pressure" days, representing a clear signal to our allies and partners that Washington is neither committed to nor serious about countering Iran's support for terrorism and its pursuit of regional hegemony.²⁹ These numbers illustrating the dramatic increase in oil revenue demonstrates how Iran is funding its domestic oppression and international aggression.³⁰ In the 2024 Middle East, this is exactly the wrong message to send.

V. Recommendations

To address the escalating threats posed by Iran and its proxy Houthi rebels, a comprehensive new strategy must be implemented as soon as possible. This strategy should aim to restore balance and security in the region through the following actions:

1. **Enforce Sanctions Rigorously:** Implement and strictly enforce sanctions to cut off Tehran's financial lifelines, hindering its ability to fund nuclear advancements and support regional terrorism. Sanctions must be enforced against critical sectors of Iran's economy, including oil exports, banking, and key industries, to significantly reduce Tehran's revenue streams.
2. **Reestablish Deterrence with Decisive Military Activities:** Reinforce the credible threat of military action by deploying additional military assets in the region. This involves repositioning naval, air, and ground forces to ensure rapid response capabilities, which would signal to Tehran the seriousness of U.S. commitments to securing the region. Enhancing missile defense systems and cyber defense capabilities in collaboration with regional partners can also reduce vulnerabilities to Iranian aggression. The United States must also consider targeted actions against key network nodes and logistical routes utilized by the IRGC and the Houthis. Striking these critical points will significantly disrupt their operational capabilities and logistics, signaling a strong U.S. commitment to countering regional threats and supporting global stability.
3. **Strengthen Regional Cooperation and Partnerships:** Enhance cooperation with regional allies to secure necessary access, basing, and overflight rights. This entails deepening strategic partnerships with relevant Gulf Cooperation Council countries, enhancing joint military training exercises, and expanding intelligence-sharing mechanisms to effectively counteract Iranian influence.
4. **Support Efforts to Counter the Houthi Threat:** Reinvigorate the Saudi-led coalition's efforts to neutralize the Houthi threat in Yemen by providing comprehensive military support. This support should include advanced weaponry, intelligence assistance,

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

logistical support, and training to Saudi forces. This should also include working with the Northern tribes.

5. **Bolster Defense Capabilities of Key Allies:** Provide unwavering support to Israel to safeguard its security, destroy Hamas, and deter Hezbollah from a large-scale attack against the Jewish nation. This includes ensuring Israel's qualitative military edge through the provision of advanced military technology, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing. Supporting efforts to strengthen and resupply Israel's missile defense systems, such as Iron Dome and David's Sling, is vital for protecting civilian areas from rocket attacks.
6. **Support the Iranian People:** Moreover, the United States must support the protest movement within Iran, which has been enduring the regime's oppression for years. This support could manifest in various forms—from official statements recognizing the legitimacy of the protestors' grievances to more tangible support like facilitating secure communication channels for activists and providing platforms for the voices of the Iranian people to be heard internationally.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and I look forward to your questions.