



Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia

On Iran's Proxy in Yemen: The Houthi Threat to Middle East Stability, Global Shipping,
and U.S. Servicemembers

Ending the Houthi Threat to Red Sea Shipping

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Mr. Chairman, Representative Connolly, and distinguished Members, I am honored to be able to appear before you to discuss U.S. policy toward Yemen, the Houthis, and the wider Iranian alliance network in the Middle East.

The Strategic Context

I would like to begin my remarks by placing our immediate problems with the Houthis in the wider strategic context.

I have always been fond of the Confucian saying that “the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.” So let us call some things by their right names. First, Iran is our enemy. Period. Full stop.

Iran is our enemy not because *we* want them to be but because the government of Iran wants *us* to be. This is not a problem of miscommunication or misunderstanding. With the exception of the George W. Bush Administration, every American president since Jimmy Carter has sought reconciliation if not full rapprochement with Iran, and every single one has been rebuffed—sometimes violently. The great Iran specialist Karim Sadjadpour has related that according to former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami, Iran’s Supreme Leader, ‘Ali Khamene’i, once told Khatami that he would never give up Iran’s enmity with the United States because to do so would delegitimize his rule and threaten his grip on power. Sometimes the fault is in our stars, not in ourselves.

Second, Iran is waging war against the United States and has been doing so for years, at least since 1987 when it planted naval mines throughout the Persian Gulf which were designed to—and did—strike American ships plying those waters. Ships that took no hostile action nor posed any danger to Iran. Since 1983, Iran has mounted terrorist attacks against the United States employing a variety of proxies from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia to Iraq. Altogether, those attacks have claimed the lives of over 800 Americans. Moreover, Iran works to subvert the governments of American allies across the Middle East. It employs blackmail and coercion against them, and also sponsors revolutionaries, terrorists, and insurgents against them.

As a particular example, for at least a decade after the Iranian revolution, Israel attempted to forge a tacit, strategic relationship with Iran to continue that which it had under the Shah. The Iranian regime took everything that Israel proffered, and then waged war on them too. Tehran has conducted terrorist attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets around the world, as well as

arming and assisting groups fighting for the destruction of the Jewish state such as Hizballah, Palestinian Jihad, and of course Hamas.

The source of Iran's animus is both ideological and geostrategic. The Iranian regime continues to hew to an interpretation of Shi'a Islam devised by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the first supreme leader of Iran, which calls for an Islamic state of his devising across the Islamic world. In this worldview, non-Muslims, can only be vassals, *dhimmi*s, second-class citizens in that Islamic state. Thus, the United States must be removed from the region as a foreign contagion and the Jewish state must be destroyed. Of arguably greater importance in recent decades, the Iranian regime is determined to make itself the hegemon of the Middle East, something many (arguably most) Iranians see as the "natural order" in the region. Here as well, because the United States has been the de facto hegemon since the 1970s, we must be driven out and Israel, a state more powerful than Iran, must be destroyed.

Together, these reinforcing motives have made Iran the principal revisionist power in the Middle East. That is also the primary explanation for Iran's backing of so many violent extremist groups across the region, and its leadership of what it calls its "axis of resistance." Too often, Americans assume that this alliance is animated by Shi'a solidarity. That is a dangerous misconception. Iran is far more ecumenical in its support for murder and mayhem, backing literally any group in the region willing to employ violence to overturn the status quo regardless of race, creed, or color. That is why it is the primary backer of Hamas, a violent Sunni Arab Islamist group whose members mostly do not otherwise care for Shi'a (or Persians, for that matter).

Iran's determination to overturn the status quo in the Middle East has driven its wider strategic activities over the past two decades. Others have noted the resemblance between the current geopolitical dynamics and those of the 1930s, when rival alliances began to coalesce as a precursor to the Second World War. At that time, there was nothing "natural" or inevitable about an alliance among Germany, Italy, and Japan. Italy and Japan had fought against Germany in the First World War. What brought them together was their shared desire to overturn a status quo that each thought did not properly provide them with power, wealth, and glory—as well as a common willingness to use force to overturn that status quo and take what they wanted.

A similar set of dynamics is emerging across the world today. That same determination to overturn the status quo by force is bringing China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran together to a greater and greater extent in recent years. Moreover, Iran in particular, has recognized this trend and very deliberately cultivated it to try to forge an alliance of violent, anti-status quo states to a much greater degree than any of the members of the original Axis did in the 1930s or '40s. Iran recognizes that it will be able to prosecute its war against the United States and its allies far more effectively with the active support, direct or indirect, of such an alliance of revisionist states. That is why it is providing Russia with drones and missiles for its war against Ukraine, and why it is trying so hard to ingratiate itself with China.

Yet the emergence of this revisionist alliance and the manner in which it has assisted and emboldened Tehran has been matched by a reluctance on the part of the United States that has done the same. Both the Obama and Trump Administrations were far more interested in making a deal with Iran than in confronting it. Both pushed back on it on occasion when they felt they had no other choice, but were otherwise more interested in wooing Iran than walloping it. Worse, both administrations loudly proclaimed their contempt for the traditional American role in the Middle East (and for American allies there) and trumpeted their determination to abdicate U.S. hegemony and even eliminate America's presence in the region.

This is merely an extreme form of the U.S. approach to Iran and the Middle East going back decades that has enabled Tehran's aggressive, anti-status quo behavior and brought us to our current state of affairs. Part of the problem has been that American administrations have been loath to acknowledge that Iran is our enemy because the Iranian regime wants to be regardless of what we may want. Part of our problem has been that we have been loath to acknowledge that we are fighting a war against Iran and its allies, even if a low-intensity one, because we have not wanted to expend the energy and resources we believe is required to do so. And still another part of our problems with Iran and its allies has been that, in turn, we have sought to fend off their attacks on us merely by playing defense. However, as any military officer or historian can tell you, it is effectively impossible to end—let alone win—a war by remaining solely on the defensive.

The Problem of the Houthis

Yemen is a place of constant warfare. Yemen's tribes have been fighting one another for centuries. From time to time, the constant beat of tribal warfare is punctuated by political conflicts that then fold in the ongoing tribal violence. The Houthis have been fighting Yemen's central government since 2004. When that regime, then led by the dictator, 'Ali Abdullah Saleh, was rocked by the Arab Spring events of 2011, the Houthis joined their war with that of the wider political violence breaking out across the country. They capitalized on the crumbling of the regime to advance their own agenda, and eventually gain control of the capital and the territory of what had once been "North Yemen."

The Houthis would like to take control of all of Yemen and they are fearful of the internationally-recognized government of Yemen (the Republic of Yemen Government, or ROYG). The ROYG is actually a loose and fractious coalition of groups united almost solely by their opposition to the Houthis. However, they have prevented the Houthis from taking over the entire country, and at times have driven the Houthis out of key terrain when they have had foreign backing. In short, Yemeni territory is both the Houthis' most important possession and their greatest aspiration, and the ROYG is their greatest threat and obstacle.

That said, the Houthis have developed a free-standing interest in attacking shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb. First, it should be noted that while the Houthis had conducted occasional attacks going back several years, it was not until their offensive against the Yemeni city of Ma'rib was stalemated in 2022 that they turned their attention more fully toward the Red Sea. Unable to capture Ma'rib from the ROYG, the Houthis began to import large numbers of radars and antiship weapons from the Iranians, and began to boast about their new ability to interdict global maritime trade.

What's more, military stalemate created political problems for the Houthis. Without victories to demonstrate their prowess, the Houthis only had their governance of northern Yemen to proclaim their glory, and in this area, there was nothing to brag about. Like their Iranian allies and the other members of the Axis of Resistance, the Houthis have failed miserably in terms of delivering to the people under their control. They have been unable to deliver services, pay salaries, or promote civil rights in the areas under their control. The people there are increasingly unhappy with Houthi rule.

Thus, the timing of the Houthi shift to maritime operations does not seem coincidental. It seems most likely that, unable to make further progress on the ground or deliver a decent life to the population they control, the Houthis began to build up their maritime warfare operations to open up a new front in hope that this would once again buoy their military fortunes and

overshadow their ground military, political, and economic failings. Moreover, by picking fights with new enemies, the Houthis have been able to rally some degree of support for themselves, both in Yemen and abroad.

Indeed, it is also important to understand that before their new anti-shipping campaign, the Houthis had few allies or admirers in the Middle East. The Houthis are a fundamentalist element within the Zaydi Shi'a community of Islam. Most of the Muslim world are Sunnis, and most Shi'a are "Twelvers" (*Ithna 'asharis*), not Zaydis or "Fivers." Thus, the Houthis are a minority of a minority of a minority. Moreover, their alignment with Iran did not boost their regional popularity as most Arabs (not to mention Israeli Jews, Turks, and Kurds) hate the Persians, whom they often see as condescending and domineering.

Consequently, embarking on the new strategy of maritime attacks and claiming that it was in support of the Palestinians suddenly transformed Houthi fortunes. They could now claim to be acting as a force for Muslim solidarity in favor of the Palestinians, and against the United States and Israel. By taking up the Palestinian cause, the Houthis were trying to end their pariah status in the Arab and Islamic world. And they quickly did so. Palestinian sympathizers across the Middle East and the world suddenly embraced the Houthis in ways they never had before—for many, because they had never heard of the Houthis, and for those who had because the Houthis were now portrayed as champions of the oppressed Palestinians, not as the fundamentalist Zaydi Iran-allies they actually are.

Moreover, these attacks have put the Houthis on the world map. The Houthis can now claim to be waging a war against the United States. And they have demonstrated that the world must pay attention to them because they have the potential to shut down all shipping in one of the world's critical maritime chokepoints. This has made the Houthis admired in some quarters and feared in others. In particular, it has buoyed their popularity inside Yemen itself, providing much needed relief from growing public unhappiness there.

As you are probably aware, the Houthi "slogan" is "God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! A curse upon the Jews! Victory to Islam." It is worth noting that none of that is about Yemen. It is all about goals that go far beyond the Arabian peninsula and speak to Houthi aspirations to be a major player in the region and the world, all of which are well-served by holding global trade hostage at the Bab el-Mandeb.

That has also benefitted Iran, and was likely one of Tehran's primary motives in providing the weaponry to the Houthis in the first place. Iran wants its allies and proxies to be able to put at risk global chokepoints (like the Strait of Hormuz) and otherwise threaten the interests of other countries around the world in hope of coercing them into doing Iran's bidding. In this way, the Houthis have been a hugely valuable investment for Iran at remarkably little cost.

There is one last issue to note. When the latest Yemeni civil war broke out in 2014, and for the last decade since, the United States has largely taken the position that the worst thing about it was the war itself and the humanitarian toll it was taking. Successive administrations saw the Houthis as unpleasant Iranian allies, but not threats to American interests. Nor did we concern ourselves with what might be best for the people of Yemen—the majority of whom are Sunnis (and other Zaydis) who do not want to live under a fundamentalist Zaydi regime.

The Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have demonstrated that the Yemeni civil war does engage vital American interests, both in terms of the threat to global trade via the Bab el-Mandeb and the wider threat that Iran's violent, revisionist Axis of Resistance poses to American allies across the Middle East. We now must recognize that we do have a stake in the outcome of the

Yemeni civil war beyond the mere humanitarian desire to end the killing. The Houthis cannot be allowed to win because they have demonstrated that they will use their military power beyond Yemen's borders in ways that threaten those vital American interests. They have demonstrated that American interests now lie squarely with those of the majority of Yemenis who do not want Yemen to fall under Houthi control.

Moving Rogue Regimes and their Allies

This creates the first problem with the current American strategy. Although Iran is aiding, abetting, and encouraging the Houthis to attack shipping in the Red Sea, the Houthis are doing so primarily because it is to their own advantage to do so. Indeed, perhaps the best indication of this is that in recent months, the Houthis have begun to attack ships in the Red Sea that had no connection to Israel whatsoever. This demonstrates that while the Houthi maritime strategy may have begun as a bid to show solidarity with the Palestinian cause, the benefits it has brought to the Houthis have pushed them to continue it for their own interests, which far exceed whatever may happen in Gaza.

In other words, the Houthis are getting a lot from these maritime attacks. Moreover, they are doing so at very low cost to themselves, so far.

While I want to commend the Biden Administration for responding to these unprovoked and outrageous Houthi attacks in a far more forceful manner than I had expected, I am skeptical that our air campaign will have the desired effect. We can all hope that the U.S. operations will strip the Houthis of their ability to continue these attacks, or deter them from mounting further ones. However, that seems unlikely. All that the U.S. is doing so far is striking at the Houthi anti-shipping capability itself which is extremely cheap for the Houthis, both because the weapons they are using are cheap to manufacture and because most of that cost is being borne by the Iranians. It is also worth remembering that the Houthis weathered years of airstrikes by the Saudis and Emiratis without it having any impact on their behavior.

Moreover, the military systems our forces are employing are often far more costly than the Houthi and Iranian systems we are destroying. In addition, we have limited stockpiles while the Houthis and the Iranians just keep making more. It seems likely that we will choose to conserve our remaining arsenal of SM-2s, TLAMs, and other munitions to hedge against other threats long before the Houthis and Iranians are ready to stop building and launching the Shahed-136s, anti-ship ballistic missiles, and anti-ship cruise missiles, that they have been launching in the Red Sea.

Finally, one of the most important lessons of millennia of warfare is that purely defensive strategies do not win wars, nor can they end wars quickly. No matter how successful a defense may be, attackers don't stop attacking just because they aren't making progress. Until the defender takes the offensive and puts at risk something of great value to the attacker—or defeats them in battle and then goes on the offensive to impose their will on the attacker's civilian populace—the attacker won't give up. Indeed, the protracted conflicts of the Middle East from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Iran-Iraq War to the Israel-Hizballah and Israel-Hamas confrontations all demonstrate this rule of war.

Yet the American strategy toward Yemen right now is purely defensive. American ships intercept Houthi missiles fired at maritime traffic in the Bab el-Mandeb, and now American aircraft and ships mount pre-emptive attacks on Houthi missiles being readied for firing. That is a purely defensive strategy. It is historically unlikely that it will be enough to convince the Houthis to stop.

Reviving the Reagan Doctrine for Yemen

If that proves correct, then the United States is going to have to adopt a different strategy, probably as a complement to its defensive operations. One that can put at risk something that the Houthis value more than everything they are currently getting from their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. And because they are getting so much from it in their own eyes, what the U.S. puts at risk is going to have to be something of great value to them.

Historically, there is only one thing that the Houthis have demonstrated matters more to them than anything else, and that is their control over Yemeni territory.

In 2018, a land force of Yemeni tribesmen backed and spearheaded by several thousand UAE armor and special forces mounted a devastating drive from their base at Aden, up the Red Sea coast. This force repeatedly overwhelmed Houthi defensive positions, taking the port of Mokha and other towns, and threatening to take Hudaydah—at that point, the last major port in Houthi hands. The Houthis had no military capability to stop the Emirati-led assault and in their desperation, agreed to negotiate. Unfortunately, the United States agreed with the international perspective—amplified by Houthi propaganda—that a battle for Hudaydah would be a humanitarian catastrophe. Consequently, the Emirates and their Yemeni allies were forced to agree to terms that left Hudaydah in Houthi hands, because when the Houthis reneged on their commitments, the international community did nothing.

Likewise, as I noted above, when the Houthi offensive against Ma'rib was stymied by Emirati-trained and equipped ROYG forces (backed by Saudi airstrikes) in 2022, once again the Houthis agreed to negotiate a ceasefire agreement. What both of these incidents demonstrate is that what the Houthis value most is their possession of Yemeni territory, and only when that is threatened will they agree to compromises and concessions. Consequently, if the United States and its allies are going to convince the Houthis (and the Iranians) to halt the attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, we are going to have to create a similar threat.

So far, the American people have shown little inclination to employ American ground forces in Yemen, nor should we do so. It is unnecessary to achieve our objectives, and potentially harmful if we do so poorly, as we did so in Iraq before the Surge and in Afghanistan throughout our 20-year involvement there.

Instead, we should look to various examples from the 1980s when the United States covertly armed and assisted indigenous forces fighting against countries or other groups inimical to our interests. The Mujahideen in Afghanistan were the best known and among the most successful. However, the Forces Armées Nationales Tchadiennes (FANT) in Chad arguably won an even greater victory over Libyan forces that would ultimately play an important role in undermining Muammar Qadhafi's regime and defanging his aggressive designs on North Africa. Likewise, the Nicaraguan Contras ultimately forced the Daniel Ortega government to agree to real elections in 1990 that ousted Ortega and the Soviet-backed Sandinistas from power. The same approach yielded more mixed results in the case of Angola, but it did force the Soviet-backed MPLA to agree to real elections in 1992 in which UNITA was able to compete and secure a draw.

In Yemen, employing the same approach would mean arming, equipping, and training ROYG forces. Although some advanced anti-tank guided missiles and other systems might be provided, most of the arms should be old Soviet weapons. In Yemen, 1950's vintage T-55 tanks and D-30 artillery pieces are still the kings and queens of the battlefield and there is no need to provide the ROYG with the same kinds of equipment that the Ukrainians so desperately require

to fend off the Russian invasion. And all of this would be best done by the paramilitary resources of the CIA, rather than by the U.S. armed forces.

It would ideally also mean continuing to employ American air and naval assets to defend shipping in the Red Sea, to degrade Houthi military assets, and to interdict Iranian weapons shipments to the Houthis, although the last has proven difficult. The United States also might consider providing direct air support to ROYG ground forces, which could be enormously helpful to them.

Moreover, the United States should maintain this military pressure on the Houthis not merely until they are ready to agree to cease attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, but until they are willing to lay down their arms and agree to a new political compact for Yemen that would restore a national government in which they could participate as individual Yemenis, able to organize as a political party but no more.

The Least Bad Option

No policy proposal is ever without flaws and drawbacks. That is especially true when we contemplate policy options toward the Middle East at this moment in time when the United States has squandered so many opportunities in the past. I will only contend that the course of action I have outlined above is the least bad of all of our realistic courses of action.

The principal shortcoming of my proposed approach is that the ROYG is hardly a perfect partner. Again, it is largely a grab bag of political and tribal entities whose only bond is their hatred of the Houthis. They could easily fall apart as soon as the Houthis are defeated, and possibly even before then.

While that is a serious liability and would need to be integrated into American plans, it need not be a showstopper. The Afghan Muj were just as fissiparous, and of course, their alliance *did* fall apart as soon as the Soviets were evicted. However, that example also furnishes a useful remedy: America's greatest mistake in Afghanistan was to walk away after the Soviet retreat. Had we truly waged "Charlie Wilson's War," and maintained our engagement afterwards, there is reason to believe that Afghanistan might have worked out very differently and likely without the Taliban in charge.

In fact none of the opposition groups the United States backed in the 1980s and '90s were perfect partners. They were all horribly flawed in various ways. Yet they all accomplished important missions in defense of vital American interests. We should take heart from those accomplishments even while preparing to address the ROYG's deficiencies in ways we simply did not with the Muj, the FANT, the Contras, or UNITA.

As for the likely alternatives, they all seem worse to me. Less likely to accomplish America's goals and at higher cost.

I have noted the flaws with the Administration's current approach, even while I appreciate their willingness to defend American interests in ways that neither of their predecessors were.

While I do not oppose the idea of striking directly against Iranian targets, particularly Iranian military and intelligence targets, I am skeptical that it will achieve our goals in Yemen. The Houthis have their own interests at play, and their gains are so significant that if their hold on Yemen is not threatened, I am very skeptical that Tehran could order them to desist from further attacks in the Red Sea even if direct American strikes on Iranian assets convinced Khamene'i that he should try to do so. Again, the Houthis are allies of Iran, not proxies, and they are like rabid dogs, extremely difficult to control and likely to bite the hand that feeds them.

Over the past ten years and following the Israeli model, the United States has leaned ever more heavily on targeted killings as a tactic against difficult Middle Eastern actors. This, what I call “War by Assassination,” can certainly help degrade an adversary, but it so far has not won a war by itself. Moreover, neither we nor the Israelis have yet succeeded in employing it to coerce an enemy. Despite a sustained, successful campaign of targeted killings by Israel, Iran has not shut down its nuclear program, and to the extent it has halted it at times, these halts have come as a result of diplomacy backed by harsh sanctions and the threat of more massive force. The Israeli assassination campaign may have impeded its work, but that is all it can claim, and it is not even clear that it did that.

America’s own campaigns of targeted killing—against ISIS, the Iranian-backed Hashd ash-Shaabi groups in Iraq, against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and elsewhere—have also hurt those groups by killing important leaders, but none were sufficient to get any of them to halt their nefarious activities or even their attacks on Americans. The highest profile of all targeted killings, that of Qasim Sulaymani in 2020, is also the best illustration. Because Sulaymani was uniquely talented and trusted by Khamene’i, his death was a major blow to Iran’s aggressive expansion across the Middle East and left Tehran and its allies in a state of disarray for several years. However, it did not convince Iran to give up its violent campaign to dominate the Middle East. It may even have given it additional impetus.

To end my remarks by bringing the topic back to the advantages of this course of action, it is the only one of those proposed that offers the prospect of destroying Houthi military power altogether. That would certainly not happen quickly, but it is a feasible long-term prospect. And doing so would be an enormous blow to Iran, depriving it of an important ally in a critical part of the world. What’s more, it would give heart to America’s allies that the United States was no longer surrendering the Middle East to Iran, or even relegated to merely playing defense while Iran attacks everywhere it can until it inevitably finds a chink in the armor it can exploit.

Aiding the government of Yemen’s coalition to take the fight to the Houthis and push them out of areas they have taken over would be a critical signal to our allies that the United States is finally ready to help them take back their lives and their lands. Nothing could have a more salutary effect on a region that desperately needs to believe that a better path is possible and that they are not being abandoned by the United States to Tehran’s suzerainty.