

Sailing Slow: Washington's Red Sea Strategy

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introduction

The United States has announced the mobilization of more forces and combat groups to the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula from the Red Sea to the Arabian Gulf. It maintains that the aim is to deter escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian war in Gaza, which may expand to a widespread regional war.

On October 21, the Pentagon announced taking additional steps to achieve this goal and [increase](#) the posture of American forces in the Middle East, including: A) sending the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower- CVN-69 Carrier Strike Group to the Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility- which covers the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula. B. the deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery as well as additional Patriot battalions to locations throughout the region to increase force protection for U.S. forces. C. placed an on prepare orders as part of prudent contingency planning, to increasing the readiness to deploy an additional number of forces as required.

The naval pieces have already crossed the Suez Canal to the Red Sea on November 4. The Carrier Strike Group (CSG) Commander, Admiral Marc Miguès [said](#): "we will be leveraging our presence in the theater to enhance regional security and operate alongside our allies and partners."

The American announcement came just two days after the United States announced that the USS Carney intercepted Cruise missiles and drones over the Red Sea. The missiles and droned were fired from Yemeni territory by the Iranian-backed Houthis towards southern Israel. Although the Houthis did not formally claim responsibility for the attack, they claimed responsibility for several subsequent attacks on Israel in the following weeks. Israel said that it thwarted some attacks over the Red Sea; some missiles hit their targets, though. The Houthis have repeatedly threatened to target Israeli commercial ships and American battleships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. They have always been a concern for maritime security since they controlled Sana'a in September 2014. On November 19, they hijacked an India-bound cargo [ship](#) in the Red Sea.

The Houthis are not the only ones who threaten Israel and the American forces, but rather most allies of Iran in the region do.

Hezbollah threatens to enter into a direct war with Israel in southern Lebanon, at a time when operations and exchange of cross-border bombardment continue. The pro-Iran Shiite groups in Iraq and Syria have been carrying out organized attacks on American military capabilities and bases since October 7. The attacks, let alone concerns of a broader war, can reverse the US efforts in recent years to reduce American presence in the Middle East as part of the strategy of moving to [the Pacific Ocean](#). Although it was expected that the Pentagon would send additional forces to the Mediterranean, sending an aircraft carrier and an SCG to the Red Sea is a new transformation towards one of the main choke points that was part of the strategic bases game during the Cold War (1945-1989).

So, how does the deployment of US forces in the Red Sea affect the United States' strategy? What are the implications of the deployment of US forces in the Red Sea for Yemen and the region at large?

Belated attention

The United States did not pay any attention to the Red Sea region over the past decade. Despite the growing threats in recent years, including the war in Yemen and the Iranian threat of using the Houthis to disrupt international navigation, the Gulf disputes (2017-2022) that affected US bases overlooking the Red Sea in East Africa, and the increasing number of multinational military bases near Bab al-Mandab Strait, the United States has not taken any measures to address these developments appropriately. This failure thwarted its attempts to achieve its strategic goals in the region and caused its Gulf allies to lose confidence in it, especially in view of the tendency of the last three US administrations to withdraw from the region prior to the commencement of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022. This lack of American interest in the Red Sea continued until the Israeli war on Gaza was launched with infinite US support and the fact that America's main ally was subjected to Iranian threats through other regional actors who launch attacks on Israel and on American forces and interests in the region if the war on Gaza continues.

Some months before the current Israeli war on Gaza, the United States was already increasing its presence in the Red Sea in an attempt to enhance its posture and roles and reset its relations with the region after the developments both in the region and on the world stage, especially the China-brokered Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, the Russian war in Ukraine, and the transformations in the dynamics of relations between countries in the region and the superpowers.

In August, the Fifth Fleet of the US Navy announced the [arrival](#) of more than 3,000 American troops aboard the two warships: USS Bataan and USS Carter Hall. In July, it [announced](#) the decision to deploy additional forces, including thousands of Marines, F-35 and F-16 fighters, as well as the USS Thomas Hudner. In late March, the United States [sent](#) military aircrafts to the region. According to Pentagon military officials, it is planned that these additional forces will have a [permanent](#) presence in the region.

However, after October 7, the Pentagon announced sending a striking force that included two CSGs, each carrying about 7,500 troops and two amphibious vessels carrying thousands of the marines. They entered the Red Sea in early November. USS Dwight D. Eisenhower CSG in the Red Sea is joined by [four](#) warships: USS Bataan, Carter Hall, Hudner, and Carney. The Pentagon also [revealed](#) that an Ohio-class nuclear-powered guided missile submarine crossed the Suez Canal. Submarines of this model can carry 154 Tomahawk Cruise missiles. Usually, submarines, also called the "silent service," work secretly. The Ministry of Defense intentionally [published](#) this statement to affirm its presence in the region. Washington says that deployment of its forces on the international trade corridor in the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf comes in response to security challenges and to protect its ally, Israel, along with its Gulf allies.

This is a major shift in the American interest in the Red Sea. Although it is unclear and the US continues to link it to Iran and regional concerns, rather than presenting it as a permanent American interest, it hints at the possibility of reordering the priorities of American deterrence, even if this process goes very slowly.

The Red Sea in American deterrence priority scale

The CSG deployed by the US in October and November will operate in the region under the Central Command (CENTCOM), the deterrence priorities of which do not include any missions in the Red Sea region. During the past decade, its missions were limited to deterring Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb, resolving the situation in Afghanistan, carrying on the ISIS defeat campaign in Iraq and Syria, and facing the threat of drones.

Moreover, the US Central Command [posture statement](#) (2023) shows that the US leadership's lack of interest in this waterway is crystal clear. The only reference to the Red Sea in the statement talked about Task Force 59's completion of an International Maritime Exercise—that took place in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean—in which forces from 50 countries participated. Even in the case of Yemen, the reference to the war near Bab al-Mandab Strait aims only to highlight Iran's ability to destabilize and incite attacks on US partners and threaten tens of thousands of Americans in the Gulf. According to the statement, until the United States helped secure the truce in Yemen, Iran was using Yemen regularly as a testing ground for those drones. It is a clear indication that the Iranian regime has stopped using Yemen as a testing ground for drones after the April 2022 truce was reached! However, this is undoubtedly inaccurate information.

In addition to the lack of interest at the level of the Combatant Command (CCMD), CENTCOM does not have a [subordinate operations command](#) in the Red Sea. In short, CENTCOM does not have the desire, mission or the current command organization to deal with the Red Sea. An internal American military study of the Red Sea indicates that the US Africa Command (AFRICOM)—especially the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) is the only extant command situated to assume control over the Red Sea arena, but its current structure does not support it assuming this responsibility. CJTF-HOA was established in 2002 as a consequence of the September 11 attacks to conduct counter-violent extremist organization operations in East Africa. CJTF-HOA is responsible for a combined JOA that covers 12 East African countries—and an area of interest (AOI) of nine additional nations—that includes all the countries in the Red Sea region that are in AFRICOM's AOI.

At present, most US [military bases](#) and establishments are situated in the region near the Red Sea, either in coastal states or in the sub-region under CENTCOM and AFRICOM, "in Djibouti, Somalia, Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia." Facilities and bases are situated in the sub-region of the waterway on the side of the Horn of Africa in Kenya and Uganda. and near Arabian Gulf waters: in Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, the UAE and Iraq.

However, US interest in Red Sea security has gradually declined since the Cold War, leaving a "vacuum" which prompted other countries to strengthen their presence near Bab al-Mandab Strait with military bases or with an increasing maritime military presence. AFRICOM and CENTCOM focus mainly on the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf, and to a lesser extent on the Red Sea.

For this reason, the internal study recommends the creation of a new command: the East Africa and Red Sea Command (EARSCOM). This command should be based on the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), while addressing the issue of the personnel of this force. EARSCOM should be assigned a JOA that includes, at least, the following nations: Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan, from the AFRICOM AOR and Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen from the CENTCOM AOR. In addition to the JOA, EARSCOM should be assigned an AOI that includes other African and Middle Eastern nations with significant equities in the Red Sea region (e.g., South Sudan, Turkey, and Uganda). EARSCOM should either have direct liaison authority with CENTCOM or be assigned to report to both AFRICOM and CENTCOM. Reporting to two combatant commanders is not without precedent. In fact, after AFRICOM began operations in 2008, CJTF-HOA initially operated under both AFRICOM and CENTCOM with responsibilities on both the African continent and in Yemen.

A Change of US Strategy in the Red Sea

In this vulnerable situation in the Red Sea and the US military leadership's lack of interest in placing the security of this vital waterway in their priorities, the American deterrence strategy in the region is dysfunctional, and makes mobilization of the forces to the region a tactic of flexing muscle, which increases the anger of governments and the population in the region. It can send a message of reassurance to Israel that Washington undertakes to protect, but it increases the tension in a charged region in which the current "boiling point" pushes towards explosion not only in the Arabian Peninsula, but also on the opposite end of the Red Sea in Africa: in Egypt and Sudan in particular. With this mobilization, strategists compare the situation in the region to that it witnessed during the Cold War (1945-1990), as it risks the entry of other- essentially alien- regional and international actors in the Red Sea.

It also increases the maritime military operations of countries with military bases on the Red Sea and turn it into a point of friction where skirmishes might snowball into a large-scale war, let alone the disruptive and negative effect of the polarization between East and West on the internal and regional stability of countries in the region.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US strategy in the Red Sea has been based on ensuring the safe flow of oil and trade supplies, the protection of Israel, fighting marine piracy, fighting terrorism, and containing Iran, but in the past decade, these foundations of US strategy have declined due to the following:

- The United States is free from the need to secure and protect oil supplies from producers in the Gulf after it became a major producer of energy, as its imports from OPEC (dominated by the Gulf states)— which pass through Bab al-Mandab Strait— [dropped](#) from 85% to 14%. In the meanwhile, most of the Gulf countries [still](#) rely on American protection.
- Threats from the Red Sea facing the Israeli occupation have fallen to zero.
- Piracy in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden coming from Africa fell from a major threat to navigation through Bab al-Mandab Strait in 2008 until it [almost disappeared](#) in 2022.
- The United States focused more on the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, withdrawal from Afghanistan, and to a lesser extent on Al-Qaeda in Yemen and East Africa, especially after reports that Al-Qaeda had been weakened.
- The US strife with Iran and Iranian expansion in the region was reduced to the goal of preventing Iran from possessing a nuclear bomb. This was clearly reflected in the nuclear agreement with Iran in 2015 (from which Donald Trump withdrew in 2021), while the Biden administration is trying to return to it.

In spite of these changes, the United States continued to confirm its commitment to the security of the Red Sea and the region. However, American withdrawal was clear in the last decade, especially with the sudden American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, which was preceded by the signing of the nuclear agreement with Iran. It was also evident in the weak American reaction to Houthi and Iranian attacks on commercial ships sailing through the Red Sea and the attacks on vital civil facilities in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While the US was turning its back on the Middle East, it was [focusing](#) its priorities on containing Russian influence in eastern Europe and Central Asia, containing Chinese economic rise and the risks facing its national security and foreign policy, and what it describes as "the rules-based international order" that was set up by the West in a unipolar world.

However, risks in the Red Sea re-emerged, with the Russian war in Ukraine (2022), the outcomes of the dysfunctional American policies towards the region: fighting several wars, the weak US positions towards issues of national security of countries in the region, and unreservedly supporting the Israeli occupation at the expense of resolving the Palestinian issue, which brought about the current reality. US priorities in the Red Sea at present can be summarized in the following:

- **Protecting Israel and American troops:** This principle jumped to the top of US priorities only in October 2023, with the "existential threat" facing Israel and the threat to launch attacks targeting it in light of its brutal war on Gaza. Therefore, more than 17,000 US troops were deployed in the region in an attempt to reassure the Israeli occupation with more protection. Thus, the number of US troops in the region has doubled since October 07. In addition to protecting Israel, these troops are tasked with protecting the American forces in the region (the Gulf and East Africa) and US naval forces in the Red Sea against possible operations by Iran or its Houthi proxies in Yemen.

The United States is worried about retaliatory attacks targeting its troops in the region, especially in view of the growing anger of the Arab peoples at its unlimited support for Israel and ignoring the calls of its allies to a ceasefire.

In order to protect Israel, the United States may push its allies in the region to build ballistic missile early warning systems in their territories to thwart any attack coming from Iran or from Yemen. US National Defense [Strategy](#) (2022) also refers to plans to "establish a network of air and missile defense capabilities across the Middle East to facilitate greater cooperation while bolstering defense through a layered approach." Israel and the United States have always ensured that early warning systems are set up in the UAE if Iran launched attacks on Israel. In addition, the Pentagon will push other reinforcements that [include](#) recently deployed Terminal High Altitude Area Defense and Patriot missile defense systems and additional fighter squadrons.

- **Iranian weapons transfer operations:** Iran has used the Red Sea to transport weapons to the Houthi armed group.

The ballistic missiles and drones gave the Houthi group a better position in the civil war. However, the issue is not restricted to the Houthis. During the reign of former Sudanese president Omar Al-Basheer, weapons were smuggled via the Red Sea to the Palestinian resistance, but Sudan has joined the wave of normalization with the Israeli occupation since 2020.

Iranian ships and vessels sailing in or close to the Red Sea region will not be excluded from surveillance. Thus, surveillance will include the Iranian-flagged Behshad cargo ship near the Red Sea, which replaced the Saviz in August 2021, which had patrolled the region since 2016. Four months before being replaced, the ship was targeted in a mine blast [believed to be carried out by Israel](#). US officials say the Revolutionary Guards Corps uses the Behshad, as it had used the Saviz, to gather intelligence in the Red Sea to help Iran's Houthi allies in Yemen. Former US President, Donald Trump, imposed sanctions on the two ships in 2018 as part of his maximum campaign to pressure Iran.

- **Containment of Russia and China:** Obviously, American strategists felt the extent of the threat posed by the return of Russia, the increasing Chinese influence in the region and the status of the Red Sea in their global strategy. That restores to their minds—through the incitement of their European allies— the Cold War and the Red Navy operations in the Red Sea.

The White House [Strategy](#) 2022 identified China and Russia as serious challenges to American national security and to Washington's foreign policy. Although it indicated that its future efforts to counter Chinese and Russian influence on the high seas focus on the Indian and Pacific Ocean, it was reflected in one way or another on its strategy in the region in five principles focusing on deterrence, strengthening partner capacity, enabling regional security integration, countering terrorist threats, and ensuring the free flow of global commerce. [According to the strategy](#), "the United States will 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, nor tolerate efforts by any country to dominate another—or the region—through military buildups, incursions, or threats."

- **Protecting US advantages:** The re-deployment of forces on the high seas and oceans enhances the deterrence that Washington almost has lost because of its policy in the region, especially in the Middle East.

The United States is strong and enjoys political and economic influence thanks to its alliances. Therefore, its strategy in the Red Sea will be one of its goal of preserving the advantages that it had enjoyed since 1945, rather than losing them to its new competitors. According to the [White House strategy](#) 2022: "Competition with the PRC is most pronounced in the Indo-Pacific, but it is also increasingly global. Around the world, the contest to write the rules of the road and shape the relationships that govern global affairs is playing out in every region and across economics, technology, diplomacy, development, security, and global governance."

Also, the American National Defense strategy does not separate its strategy to counter Russian and Chinese influence and security challenges in the region, which, according to the strategy, will be faced in "effective and sustainable ways" by enhancing regional integration through building political, economic and security ties between and among its partners, including through integrated air defense structures. This requires an American presence for a longer period in the region so that Russia, China, and even Britain does not replace it as a substitute in the region.

Therefore, the American, Western, and Gulf activity in the Red Sea off the coast of Yemen has increased since the start of the Russian war in Ukraine. This activity was driven by the concerns of Russian access to the Sudanese ports, and [assuring](#) the Gulf allies of its stay in the region and ensuring the protection of oil fields and tankers. The United States also announced plans to establish a Gulf deterrent coalition with the Israeli occupation to confront Iran and its allies. After the Abraham Accords, the [Pentagon moved](#) Israel from the US European Command to the US Central Command to enhance closer cooperation between the Gulf states and Israel. The UAE and Bahrain conducted several exercises with Israel in the Red Sea.

The US established the Combined Task Force (CTF) 153, which focuses on international maritime security and "capacity building efforts in the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden." This force is part of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) with its headquarters in Manama. It will boost the efforts of the three task forces (CTF 150, 151 and 152) that already operate under the Combined Maritime Forces.

Current deterrence priorities: Iran not included

After the war on Gaza was launched, many Iran-backed armed groups throughout the region, from Hezbollah to the Houthis, have threatened Israel and the United States.

At the beginning of the war, Iranian official television warned of attacks on Israel from multiple fronts of the surrounding fire circle, if the brutal war on Gaza continues. The Iranian [television claimed](#) that the Houthis in Yemen have missiles with a range of over 1,200 miles. This did happen later when the Houthis claimed responsibility for the attacks on October 31 and on November 06. Israel intercepted some of the missiles, others fell into the Red Sea or in the Jordanian desert. On October 27, explosions of Nuweiba and Taba took place in South Sinai. The Houthis did not officially comment on the incident, while the Egyptian army said that the attack came from the south of the Red Sea. This incident took place a week after the Houthis launched Cruise missiles and drone attack on Israel. The missiles and drones were intercepted by the USS Carney over the Red Sea.

On November 19, the Houthis [announced](#) seizing a ship in the Red Sea. The Houthi military spokesman, Yahya Sari, said, "We will target all the ships owned or operated by Israeli companies, or displaying the Israeli flag."

The threat did not come from Yemen alone. With the progress of Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip, US forces, and even Israel, were targeted in frequent drone and missile attacks in the Middle East. The attacks resulted in casualties of American forces in Iraq, Syria and the Red Sea. Therefore, the United States believes that deployment of its forces in the region supports the idea of joint US-Israeli deterrence in the region, which was reflected in Biden's visit to Israel at the start of the military operations in the Gaza Strip.

Therefore, in view of this military mobilization, the priorities of American deterrence are to enhance the protection of Israel from the threats posed by the pro-Iranian groups and have nothing to do with the protection of the US Gulf allies as much as it deals with protecting the American forces in the Gulf. It also seeks to fill the void that Washington had left and to impose restrictions on Chinese and Russian relations with the traditional US allies, which have grown more intimate in recent years. Moreover, it aims to slow down the marine and economic strategies of Moscow and Beijing, which have placed the Red Sea in their priorities in the past decade.

From this standpoint, the new American presence in the region will be concentrated in the Red Sea, and it will be more flexible to move to and from the Mediterranean in light of fears of Hezbollah's entry into the war with Israel and if the war expands by the entry of Egypt and the closure of the Suez Canal.

Therefore, most of the forces will be deployed in the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula from the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, rather than positioned in the western Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf to confront Iran.

The White House clearly indicates that the target is the smaller parties— the proxies and allies of Iran. Apparently, the Biden administration does not see an Iranian direction of the operations launched from Yemen or in Syria and Iraq, or that Iran is implicated in them. However, the White House is reluctant to discuss whether Iran is directing its allies in a joint operations room called the "unity of fronts" to target US troops. When the American administration was asked on October 19— after intercepting Houthi missiles and drones over the Red Sea— if the American administration saw "any connection between these — Yemen, Syria, and Iraq [attacks] at this point, in terms of Iran directing or some great hand directing the attacks," the Pentagon press secretary did not mention Iran, and instead [answered](#): "I think you have to look at these individually." Therefore, it seems that this mobilization aims to neutralize and take revenge on groups affiliated and aligned with Iran, including the Houthis in Yemen, and get prepared if other countries and parties intervene. The water crafts that have been deployed in the Red Sea offer a glimpse of the nature of this revenge, which seems to hint at an offensive nature.

The Carrier [Strike Group](#) (CSG) 2, which entered the Red Sea in early November, comprised of flagship aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69), guided-missile cruiser USS Philippine Sea (CG 58), guided-missile destroyers USS Mason (DDG 87) and USS Gravely (DDG 107) of Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 22, Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 3 with its nine squadrons, and the Information Warfare Commander. The F-35, F-15, F-16 and A-10 fighters have also been deployed to supplement the aircraft squadrons already in the region. Israel also [announced](#) the deployment of Sa'ar-class corvettes in the Red Sea, after the Houthis announced launching attacks on October 31, making the American presence in the Red Sea region the largest in decades, even during the Cold War era.

Is Yemen affected by these variables?

Although American deployment in the Red Sea has multiple goals— as stated above, the Houthi attacks on Israel were taken as a justification for sending additional forces. At the same time, American officials are aware that by declaring war on the Israeli occupation, the Houthis want to affirm three main points.

declaring war on the Israeli occupation, the Houthis want to affirm three main points. The first point is that they are part of, and in full coordination with, the Iranian-led resistance axis and that they can take the initiative to support this axis and are not merely passive receivers of military and financial support. In other words, they present themselves as part of the axis, even if their impact on the Israeli war amounts to nothing, as most of the ballistic missiles and drones they fired either fell before hitting their targets in southern Israel or were intercepted by Israeli defenses.

The second point is boosting their popularity in the country, following the increasing loss of supporters and popularity during the past two years, in an attempt to obtain a legitimacy to stay in power— especially in view of the lack of international legitimacy— and presenting their opponents and their Gulf backers as supporters of the Israeli occupation. The scope of their success in this point remains doubtful.

The third point, the Houthis want to present themselves as a big power capable of inflaming the Israeli war on Gaza to a regional war, which presses international concerns— Gulf and American concerns in particular— to accept an agreement that meets Houthi conditions in Yemen.

In contrast to Iran's allies in Iraq and Syria, it seems that the Houthis are deliberately targeting Israel, which will not be affected by the attacks— rather than the American forces or US bases in the region, for fear of Washington's reaction to the group as reports indicate that the White House threatened to respond quickly.

Conversely, what will the United States do in Yemen?

Nearly two months after the Israeli war on Gaza started, the United States did not seem to have changed its policy towards Yemen. American troops will continue to coordinate with their allies in the region, especially the countries which are home to US bases, for further protection through the THAAD air defense system and intelligence information. It will also continue to gather information via satellites and drones about the Houthis and their advanced weapons, while conducting full surveillance of Yemeni islands in the Red Sea. As a result of such activities, the Houthis have downed an MQ9-class US drone on November 09.

However, this American position may change based on developments in Houthi attacks and the size of the damage they cause in Israel, though current Houthi capabilities do not seem to be able to create damage,

or if the Houthis carry out their threats to target navigation in the Red Sea—including attacking Israeli ships—or targeting American troops, or nearby US military bases in the Arab Gulf states and East Africa. American policy towards the Houthis is expected to be as follows:

- The US will continue to pressure the Houthis through a third country and to warn them against launching attacks on the Israeli occupation. Although such attacks have little impact on the occupation, they push it to allocate part of the Israeli defenses to southern Israel away from the other war theaters. It also puts American forces on alert to monitor the path of launching the missiles and drones and to intercept them over the Red Sea, if possible.
- Launching fast and decisive attacks inside Yemeni territory to destroy the infrastructure used by the Houthis to store, install and launch ballistic missiles and drones. Voices demanding American deterrence against the Houthis [rose](#) in the House of Representatives after the Houthis shot down an MQ9 unmanned aircraft.
- Although the Biden administration has not changed its policy towards the Houthis after the recent attacks, voices began to rise in the American Congress. Voices in the American security experts' community are now calling for a stronger American position towards the Houthis. Some experts assert that launching missiles and drones link the group strongly with the Iranian "unity of fronts" strategy targeting the American forces and presence in the region, and hence justify redesignating the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). [Indeed](#), moves in the Congress began on a [draft resolution](#) calling for redesignating the Houthis as a terrorist organization after the group had been removed by the Biden administration in 2021, only a few weeks after the Trump administration placed them on the FTO list. This designation entails major US economic sanctions against the Houthis in particular and on Yemen in general.

Most of the escalation concerning Yemen can be set in the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government will keep calm. It is not in the interest of the Houthis to expose themselves to extensive military operations inside Yemeni territory. The United States will start with political measures in Washington before launching extensive bombing operations in Yemen to push the Houthis to back down from launching marine operations. However, there may be external factors that contribute to prolonging the war and its expansion beyond the Gaza Strip. Iran and Israel may push the United States to a war in the Red Sea, in which the US will use the forces it has deployed.

Tel Aviv and Tehran have a notorious history of secret conflict in the high seas and targeting cargo ships. [Since 2021](#), Iran has harassed, attacked, or seized nearly 20 commercial ships with international flags, a number of which were owned by Israeli companies or businessmen. In 2019-2020, Israel bombed at least [12 ships](#) bound for Syria, most of which were carrying Iranian oil, in addition to the attack on the Saviz, anchored in the Red Sea. Similarly, the Houthis [have](#) a history of targeting ships, and Iran could direct them to launch attacks if it is targeted in naval attacks.

In view of the Israeli and Iranian presence in the Red Sea, maritime conflict does not seem a remote possibility. In October, an Arabic-service [Iranian television](#) aired details of a marine operation targeting an Israeli military base in the Dahlak Archipelago in Eritrea, near Yemen. The Houthis did not claim responsibility for the attack, nor did the Israelis comment on it. However, the [Israelis believe](#) that the attack was launched by the Iranian ship, Behshad, anchored somewhere between Yemen and Eritrea.

Strategy or reaction?

It does not seem that the mobilization after October 07 indicates an American strategy, clearly defined in the medium term, but rather appears as a reaction related to fears of the American administration that Israel is greatly threatened either by the pro-Iran groups or by the Arab countries. At the same time, it ventured bad repercussions on its foreign policy and its relations to the current and next generations of politicians and peoples in the Arab world, including its allies in the Gulf, for the defense of which the United States did not deploy aircraft carriers or such a number of maritime pieces and troops when their national security was at stake. Moreover, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula are well aware that the recent mobilization in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden has nothing to do with the security of the region, but rather to protect American forces and trade and to protect Israel.

Since the end of the Cold War, American interest in the security of the Red Sea has gradually decreased, and the vital waterway was left without a clear strategy by the US navy. Attention to the waterway resurged as a reaction to global contexts that Washington fears will lead to its loss of controlling global policies, and the privileges it obtained through decades of domination of global politics.

Therefore, the deployment of forces puts Washington before a true test of transforming this reaction and slow move to a Red Sea security strategy, in which it is a partner with the allies and the countries overlooking the waterway to ensure the safe passage of global trade. It is not in the interest of these countries to transform the southern entrance to the Red Sea into a point of friction and tension among the superpowers or regional powers that seek to make gains through sending messages via Bab al-Mandab Strait. It does not seem that the American mobilization in its current version serves stability in the Red Sea.

The United States justifies the deployment of forces as an effort to prevent the expansion of the war between the Israelis and the Palestinians through Iran's proxies in the Middle East, while ignoring the fact that the brutality of Israeli operations in Gaza may lead to expansion of the war in the region and the emergence of new groups bent on taking revenge. The US deployment of forces and support of Israel will cost Washington in the region at the short and medium terms, and each new day of war pushes more in the direction of a regional war. Instead of raising concerns about a regional war, Washington must stop the war on Gaza and pressure the Israelis to adhere to the United Nations resolutions of resolving the Palestinian issue.

Since the current administration does not see Iran as directly involved in the attacks on its forces and the Israeli occupation, it will not strike the Revolutionary Guards Corps inside Iran, but will rather strike Iran's allies in the region as it is doing currently in Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, the American forces in the Red Sea will continue to monitor the Houthi movements, gather intelligence information, increase maritime surveillance to prevent Iranian weapons from reaching the group, and inspecting the Yemeni islands to prevent attacks on Israeli, American and Western cargo ships through mines or suicide bombers from or through marine piracy operations. The American response in Yemen will depend on the extent and scope of the Houthi attacks.

The United States will practice self-control and avoid being drawn into any massive attacks in response to attacks that might target its forces or Israel in the Red Sea, but expansion of the war may lead to the US being pushed by the Israelis and Iranians to launch widespread attacks on the Houthis, especially if political procedures and penalties on the group's leaders and threats sent through a third party to the group in Sana'a fail.

At the same time, the US will not venture at the present time to redesignate the Houthis as a terrorist group, especially in view of the possibility of reaching a peace agreement that could lead to the suspension of the Houthi threat to navigation and to Israel.

Washington is expected to increase military coordination in the region and building air defense systems and early ballistic missiles and drone monitoring and warning systems in the countries of the region, in an effort to protect their forces in the Middle East and to protect Israel. However, it will not lead to the signing of comprehensive security agreements, as the UAE and Saudi Arabia hope, or to obtain military capabilities such as those owned by Israel.

Israel will postpone responding to the Houthis until the end of its war on the Palestinians in Gaza. Although the attacks launched by the armed group from Yemen have failed to reach their goals so far, after the war, Israel will build its strategy to return to the Red Sea and rebuild leadership in the Red Sea to deal with any threat from Yemen in the future. It will increase its alliance with the UAE to achieve their goals in Yemen.



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