

Missiles over the Red Sea: The U.S.-Israeli Campaign Against Yemen's Houthis

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Opening Salvo: A New Front Reaches Tel Aviv

In early May 2025, Israel conducted a series of airstrikes deep inside Yemen, marking a significant and startling geographic expansion of its confrontation with Iran-aligned actors. On 6 May, Israeli fighter jets struck Sanaa's international airport, reportedly rendering the Houthi-controlled facility inoperable. The operation was launched in direct retaliation for a ballistic missile fired by the Houthis two days earlier, which penetrated Israeli airspace and impacted near the perimeter of Ben Gurion Airport—the country's primary international gateway—creating a large crater and sparking widespread alarm. This unprecedented development represented the first instance of a successful Houthi strike near Tel Aviv, underlining the transformation of the Red Sea and its environs into an active theatre in Iran's expanding proxy war against Israel.

Israeli officials characterised the airstrike on Sanaa as a proportional response to an unprovoked attack by an Iranian proxy. The IDF described the targeted airport as a "central hub" for the transfer of Houthi weaponry and asserted that it would "continue to act and strike with force" against any group posing a threat to Israeli security. The escalation—ballistic missiles launched from Yemen into the heart of Israel, followed by retaliatory Israeli bombardment of Yemeni territory—caps a broader cycle of hostilities that began in late 2023. These hostilities have increasingly drawn both Israel and the United States into direct military operations against the Houthi movement in Yemen.

The episode underscores the convergence of several strategic imperatives: safeguarding maritime security in the Red Sea, containing the regional ambitions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and countering the entrenchment of hostile proxies operating with impunity across the Arabian Peninsula and Levant.

Timeline of Key Escalations (Late 2023 – May 2025)

October 19, 2023

Off the coast of Yemen, the U.S. Navy destroyer *USS Carney* intercepted a salvo of cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) launched by Yemen's Houthi movement. According to U.S. Department of Defense assessments, the projectiles were "reportedly targeting Israel." National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby condemned the attack as "a clear example of terrorism," underscoring the gravity of the event. The engagement, lasting nearly ten hours and involving the downing of four missiles and 15 drones, marked the most sustained U.S. naval combat operation since the Second World War. It also signalled the operational emergence of the Houthis as a new front in Iran's regional proxy network, in ostensible solidarity with Hamas following the October 7 attacks on Israel.

November 19–20, 2023

Houthi forces seized the *Galaxy Leader*, a British-owned, Japanese-operated vehicle carrier linked to an Israeli firm, while transiting the Red Sea. The hijacking was denounced by Israel as "an Iranian act of terrorism," with serious implications for global commercial shipping. Concurrently, the Houthis escalated their military

engagement, launching long-range missiles and drones towards Israel—most notably a surface-to-surface missile intercepted en route to Eilat on November 14. The group publicly declared its intent to continue “qualitative strikes” until the cessation of Israeli military operations in Gaza.

December 2023

Amid mounting Houthi attacks on commercial vessels—exceeding two dozen since mid-November—the United States initiated Operation *Prosperity Guardian* on December 18. This maritime security coalition, comprising 22 nations including the United Kingdom, France, and Italy, was tasked with safeguarding Red Sea and Gulf of Aden trade routes. Houthi forces deployed UAVs, anti-ship missiles, and explosive-laden watercraft in a campaign explicitly framed as a pressure tactic against Israel.

January 2024

Following repeated warnings, the United States and the United Kingdom launched Operation *Poseidon Archer* on January 12. This military response comprised precision strikes on Houthi infrastructure across Yemen, including targets near Sanaa International Airport, the port of Hodeidah, and coastal regions of Hajjah and Taiz. According to U.S. officials, over 60 targets were hit with more than 150 munitions, significantly degrading the Houthis’ capacity to launch aerial threats. President Joe Biden described the operation as “a clear message” regarding the unacceptable targeting of maritime assets. Despite the losses, the Houthis vowed to continue their campaign, citing support for Palestine.

Early–Mid 2024

A sustained escalation unfolded throughout the Red Sea. Coalition naval forces, including the *USS Mason* and *USS Gravelly*, engaged in near-daily intercepts of Houthi-launched drones, missiles, and naval mines. By March 2024, U.S. Central Command confirmed the destruction of over 150 Houthi weapons systems through defensive operations and airstrikes. On March 9 alone, U.S., British, and French assets downed at least 28 UAVs—an unprecedented one-day swarm. Houthi leader Abdul-Malek al-Houthi praised the group’s role in the “honourable resistance” against Israel and the United States.

April 2024

The Red Sea conflict culminated in a coordinated regional barrage on Israel. On April 13, Iranian-led forces—including the Houthis—launched a massive volley of 185 drones, 110 ballistic missiles, and 36 cruise missiles in retaliation for an Israeli airstrike in Syria that killed IRGC officers. Israeli and allied air defences intercepted the vast majority—reportedly 99%—of the projectiles, averting mass casualties but underscoring the scale of the emerging multi-front conflict.

Late 2024: Operation “White City”

As a temporary ceasefire in Gaza broke down, the Houthis resumed their attacks. In December, a missile launched from Yemen struck a playground near Tel Aviv, injuring 16 civilians. In response, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that the Houthis would “learn what Hamas and Hezbollah learned” regarding the reach of Israeli deterrence. On December 26, Israel conducted long-range strikes targeting Houthi infrastructure in Sanaa, Hodeidah, and other strategic locations. These raids coincided with the visit of the WHO Director-General to Yemen, who reportedly

sheltered during the attacks. At least nine fatalities were recorded, and Israel claimed the strikes disrupted Iranian arms trafficking into the Arabian Peninsula.

May 2025

The conflict entered a new phase with a direct Houthi strike on Ben Gurion Airport, Israel's main international hub. The attack—labelled “Palestine-2” by the Houthis—involved a hypersonic missile and marked the first successful long-range hit near Tel Aviv. Israel responded on May 6 with extensive airstrikes, crippling Sanaa International Airport and targeting military and economic infrastructure tied to the Houthi war effort. Four fatalities and 39 injuries were reported. Israeli authorities reiterated that the Hodeidah port had been instrumental in Iranian weapons transfers, accusing Iran of orchestrating the strike. Tehran denied direct involvement but warned against any escalation on Iranian territory. Concurrently, the new U.S. administration under President Donald Trump resumed heavy strikes on Houthi targets and moved to re-designate the group as a terrorist organisation.

Securing the Seas and Sending a Message: Stated Objectives

From the outset of hostilities, both the United States and Israel have consistently framed their military operations against Yemen's Houthi movement as legitimate acts of self-defence, aimed at preserving the integrity of international trade routes and safeguarding national security. For Washington, the central concern has been the protection of maritime navigation in the Red Sea—a strategic chokepoint through which approximately 10 to 15 percent of global seaborne commerce transits. President Joe Biden, in public statements following the January 2024 airstrikes, described the campaign as “a clear message” that the United States and its allies “will not tolerate attacks on our personnel or allow hostile actors to imperil freedom of navigation.” He reaffirmed that the Red Sea remains “one of the world's most critical trade routes,” and pledged to take further measures if necessary to protect U.S. personnel and commercial interests.

Similarly, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stressed that the U.S.-UK joint operations were intended “to disrupt and degrade the Houthis' capabilities to endanger mariners and threaten global trade.” American officials have sought to distinguish these airstrikes from broader involvement in Yemen's civil conflict, instead characterising them as targeted and proportionate measures designed to preserve open sea lanes. NATO aligned itself with this rationale, describing the strikes as “defensive” and emphasising their purpose in ensuring the continued freedom of navigation in a vital maritime corridor.

For Israel, the justification for its escalating military campaign against Houthi targets has centred on the direct threat posed to Israeli territory. Since November 2023, Houthi forces have launched more than 100 UAVs and missiles at maritime targets suspected of Israeli links, while also directing long-range projectiles at cities such as Eilat and Tel Aviv. Israeli officials, including National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi, have labelled these actions “intolerable,” and pledged robust responses. Following a Houthi missile strike near Tel Aviv in December 2024, Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu vowed retaliation against both the Houthis and their principal sponsor, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Israeli military statements increasingly portray Houthi military infrastructure as part of Iran's regional network of proxy forces. In justifying strikes on airports and port facilities in Sanaa and Hodeidah, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have alleged that these installations are "dual-use" sites—facilitating the transfer of Iranian missile systems and serving as operational hubs for Iranian advisors. In the May 2025 raid on Sanaa International Airport, the IDF characterised the airfield as a logistical node in the broader Iranian-Houthi military axis, asserting its role in supporting "terrorist activity" against Israel.

In both cases, the strategic messaging of the U.S. and Israel has stressed continuity with established norms of international self-defence and counterterrorism. As one senior U.S. naval officer observed, Houthi aggression in the Red Sea constituted "a violent disruption of international commerce," necessitating forceful response. Moreover, Western officials have repeatedly underscored Iran's culpability. NATO's official communiqués noted that the Houthis are "supported, supplied and equipped by Iran," implying that Tehran bears strategic responsibility for restraining its Yemeni proxies. This rhetorical framing positions Houthi belligerence within a wider context of Iranian destabilising activity across the Middle East.

Notably, U.S. officials have emphasised that their military actions are not intended to precipitate a broader war in Yemen. National Security Council spokespeople have clarified that the United States "is not seeking a war with Yemen," and American strikes have, to date, been carefully calibrated. Strike packages have predominantly targeted radar installations, drone launch facilities, and weapons storage depots, with efforts made to minimise collateral damage and avoid political or civilian targets. This operational restraint—combined with the formal separation between Operation *Prosperity Guardian* (defensive maritime patrols) and airstrikes within Yemen—reflects a deliberate attempt to limit the scope of the intervention.

Israel's messaging has similarly emphasised the retaliatory and pre-emptive nature of its strikes. Whether targeting suspected launch sites, weapons warehouses, or logistical supply routes, the stated aim has consistently been to disrupt Houthi capabilities and deter future aggression. By framing these military operations as lawful defensive measures against non-state actors engaged in transnational terrorism and piracy, both the United States and Israel seek to legitimise their actions within international legal and normative frameworks, while deterring further escalation by Iran and its allies.

Proxy War Dynamics: Iran's Shadow and Gaza's Echo

Beyond the official rhetoric of self-defence and maritime security, the military operations launched by the United States and Israel against the Houthis are unmistakably part of a broader regional confrontation. This evolving conflict aligns the United States and Israel against Iran's expanding axis of influence, with the Houthis—formally known as Ansar Allah—firmly embedded within Tehran's strategic

network. Houthi leader Abdul-Malek al-Houthi has openly characterised his movement's actions as part of a "direct confrontation with Israel and America," portraying missile and drone attacks as acts of solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Since the onset of the Hamas–Israel war in October 2023, the Houthis have repeatedly declared that their military operations are intended to support "our Palestinian brothers in Gaza."

Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Saree has asserted that such strikes will continue until what the group defines as "Israeli aggression" ceases. During a brief ceasefire in Gaza in late 2023, the Houthis temporarily halted their attacks on international shipping—only to resume once Israeli military operations recommenced in early 2024. The group has explicitly stated that a "permanent ceasefire" in Gaza is a precondition for ending its campaign. This conditionality firmly situates the Houthis within Iran's broader strategy of exerting pressure on Israel via geographically dispersed proxy forces. U.S. intelligence assessments and statements from Israeli officials strongly suggest that Iran is not merely a passive ideological patron but is materially supporting Houthi operations through the transfer of advanced weaponry, including ballistic missiles and drone technology. The seizure of Iranian missile components by U.S. Navy SEALs in January 2024—en route to Houthi-controlled areas—underscored the material dimension of this relationship.

While Tehran publicly denies exercising command over Houthi operational decisions, it has consistently endorsed their actions. Following U.S.-UK airstrikes in Yemen, Iranian officials denounced the intervention as a violation of Yemeni sovereignty and an endorsement of what they described as Israeli "war crimes" in Gaza. When Israel explicitly blamed Iran for a missile attack near Tel Aviv launched from Yemen, Iran responded by insisting that the Houthi strike was independently executed in support of Palestinian civilians. This pattern of plausible deniability has become a familiar feature of Iranian proxy warfare—providing moral and material backing to non-state actors while maintaining formal diplomatic distance to avoid direct state-to-state confrontation.

For the Houthis, this geopolitical positioning has provided significant strategic benefits. The Gaza war has offered a potent narrative with which to mobilise domestic support and broaden their regional legitimacy. Public rallies in Houthi-controlled territories have depicted their involvement as part of a larger "resistance" movement against perceived U.S. and Israeli aggression. In doing so, the Houthis have extended their influence beyond Yemen's civil war and reframed their campaign as a vanguard of pan-Islamic resistance. This has placed traditional adversaries—such as Saudi Arabia—in a complex position: Riyadh, while formally at odds with the Houthis, is constrained in its response due to the strong regional support for pro-Palestinian sentiment.

From a strategic standpoint, the Red Sea has become a proxy battlefield serving multiple agendas. For Iran, the conflict demonstrates its capacity to pressure Israel from the south while expanding its deterrence posture across the Middle East. For Israel, retaliatory airstrikes against Houthi infrastructure in Yemen serve as a signal to Tehran that no proxy, regardless of geographic distance, is immune from reprisal. U.S. involvement, while initially reluctant, has evolved in response to the scale and persistence of Houthi attacks. By late 2023, Washington began using back-channel communications to warn Tehran against escalating the Gaza conflict through regional

proxies. These warnings, once disregarded, were followed by military intervention. Congressional leaders, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, endorsed the administration's decision, describing it as a long-overdue demonstration of resolve against Iranian-aligned militias.

Nonetheless, the proxy nature of this conflict imposes constraints on its resolution. Despite U.S. and Israeli airstrikes that have degraded Houthi military capacity—destroying numerous launch sites and weapon stockpiles—the Houthis have demonstrated a notable degree of operational resilience. They have diversified their methods of attack, deploying novel technologies such as explosive unmanned surface vessels and underwater drones to threaten maritime targets. By March 2024, the group had conducted or attempted nearly 190 attacks on U.S. naval or commercial vessels.

The cyclical nature of retaliation is further illustrated by the missile exchanges between Yemen and Israel. Each Israeli airstrike has been met with new Houthi launches, including hypersonic missile attacks on Tel Aviv in December 2024 and May 2025. These tit-for-tat exchanges underscore the potential for a protracted, open-ended conflict in the absence of a broader regional settlement. Notably, the Houthis have reiterated that their operations will cease only when a “permanent ceasefire” in Gaza is secured, effectively binding Red Sea stability to the future of the Israel–Palestine conflict.

In sum, while the tactical objectives of U.S. and Israeli operations may include the suppression of missile threats and the protection of maritime routes, the underlying strategic challenge remains unresolved. These operations treat the symptoms—Houthi missile launches and piracy—but not the root causes: the structure of Iranian proxy warfare and the volatile grievance politics that sustain it. Each side's actions simultaneously reinforce the other's narrative of victimhood and aggression. As one Houthi official reportedly remarked following an Israeli airstrike, “He attacked me and cried. He preceded me and complained”—a rhetorical inversion that exemplifies the cycle of escalation. Avoiding further destabilisation will require not only military deterrence but also a robust diplomatic framework capable of addressing the broader geopolitical dynamics now playing out in the Red Sea.

Regional Reactions: Unease in Riyadh, Applause and Condemnation Elsewhere

The intensified military campaigns conducted by the United States and Israel against the Houthi movement in Yemen have elicited varied responses across the Middle East, reflecting the complex interplay of strategic interests, security calculations, and political sensitivities within the region.

Saudi Arabia, long engaged in a protracted conflict with the Houthis and sharing a substantial border with Yemen, has responded with calculated ambivalence. On the one hand, Riyadh privately welcomes the pressure exerted on its long-standing adversary. Editorial commentary in Saudi media, particularly in the wake of Israel's December 2024 “Operation White City,” even framed the Israeli strikes on Yemen as a message of deterrence directed at Iran. However, the official Saudi position has

been notably restrained. Following the U.S.–UK joint strikes in January 2024, the Saudi Foreign Ministry issued a statement expressing “great concern” and calling for de-escalation, emphasising the need to protect the security of the Red Sea region and preserve freedom of navigation.

This caution reflects Riyadh’s ongoing efforts to negotiate a peace settlement with the Houthis. Since 2022, Saudi officials have engaged in direct diplomacy with the Houthi leadership aimed at ending the war in Yemen. The Houthis, for their part, have conveyed assurances to Saudi interlocutors that their operations in the Red Sea—including attacks on Israeli-linked vessels—would not jeopardise peace talks with Riyadh. As a result, Saudi Arabia seeks to balance tacit alignment with Western efforts to constrain Iran-backed militancy with the imperative of not derailing its own fragile negotiations. Notably, while Bahrain joined Operation Prosperity Guardian, Saudi Arabia refrained from participation, positioning itself instead as a mediator rather than a belligerent actor.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have adopted a similarly cautious posture. While all six GCC members have articulated serious concerns about the threat posed by Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea—particularly given their reliance on the waterway for hydrocarbon exports—there has been limited public endorsement of Western military actions in Yemen. The UAE, despite its past military involvement in the Yemeni conflict and extensive maritime interests, has remained publicly muted. While condemning attacks on civilian shipping and affirming support for maritime security, Emirati officials have refrained from explicitly supporting U.S., UK, or Israeli strikes on Yemeni territory.

This reticence is informed by several factors. Gulf leaders reportedly view the Western response as overly militarised and potentially counterproductive, fearing that escalatory strikes could derail ongoing peace efforts or provoke broader regional instability. Some GCC officials have also voiced frustration that their broader security concerns regarding Iran’s influence are being overshadowed by an overly narrow focus on Houthi activity. Bahrain has been the notable exception; closely aligned with both Saudi Arabia and Western partners, it has contributed to coalition efforts and publicly echoed U.S. justifications for the airstrikes.

Turkey has positioned itself in sharp contrast to the GCC states. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has vehemently criticised the Western military response, condemning the U.S.–UK strikes as disproportionate and accusing Washington and London of attempting to transform the Red Sea into a “sea of blood.” Ankara’s condemnation explicitly linked the situation in Yemen to the war in Gaza, thus aligning its rhetoric with that of Iran and its regional allies. This framing is consistent with Turkey’s broader posture as a vocal advocate for Palestinian causes and a critic of perceived Western double standards.

Iran, as expected, has categorically denounced the Western and Israeli strikes, framing them as violations of Yemen’s sovereignty and extensions of support for Israeli “war crimes” in Gaza. Tehran’s officials have issued warnings of potential retaliation should Israeli operations continue against Iranian allies in the region. However, Iran has also maintained plausible deniability regarding direct command over the Houthis, asserting that their actions are autonomous expressions of

solidarity with Palestine. This ambiguity is a hallmark of Iran's proxy strategy—providing operational latitude to allied movements while avoiding formal culpability.

Reactions from other key regional actors have been similarly shaped by domestic sensitivities and geopolitical caution. Jordan and Egypt, both wary of increased instability in the Red Sea, have expressed alarm over the escalation while attributing broader blame to Israel's actions in Gaza. Amman's foreign ministry, for example, directly linked regional tensions to Israel's conduct in the Palestinian territories. Egypt, a littoral state of the Red Sea, has called for restraint without taking a definitive stance on the military actions undertaken by either side. The United Nations has likewise called for de-escalation, with Secretary-General António Guterres warning of the risks to regional peace and maritime stability.

Militant actors aligned with Iran, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, have unequivocally supported the Houthis and condemned the United States, Israel, and the United Kingdom. Hezbollah described the U.S. actions as indicative of Washington's full partnership with Israel in its war on the Palestinians. Hamas issued statements of solidarity with "our brothers in Ansar Allah," portraying the conflict in Yemen as part of a unified struggle against Western imperialism and Zionism.

Taken together, these responses reveal the fragmentation of regional consensus. Western-aligned powers, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, broadly support the containment of Houthi aggression but are wary of prolonged foreign military interventions that may undermine their own diplomatic efforts. They also fear being drawn into a wider regional conflict that could jeopardise domestic stability and energy markets. Conversely, states and non-state actors aligned with Iran have sought to link Houthi actions to the broader narrative of resistance against Israeli and Western intervention in the Middle East.

In conclusion, the regional reaction to the U.S. and Israeli campaigns against the Houthis is defined by ambivalence, strategic hedging, and narrative contestation. While some states quietly welcome the weakening of a common adversary, most prefer to maintain rhetorical distance to preserve diplomatic flexibility and avoid entanglement in a widening conflict. This delicate balancing act reflects not only the geopolitical volatility of the Red Sea theatre but also the enduring centrality of the Gaza conflict as a symbolic and strategic pivot in regional politics. The underlying concern among many Arab states is clear: once the current military crisis subsides, they will remain proximate to Yemen's internal turmoil and must manage the long-term consequences of external intervention.

Strategic Significance: The Red Sea Chessboard

The growing convergence of U.S. and Israeli military action against the Houthis in Yemen reflects a broader alignment of strategic interests in the Red Sea and Arabian Peninsula. For both nations, the escalation underscores not only shared threat perceptions regarding Iran and its regional proxies, but also the critical importance of safeguarding one of the world's most vital maritime arteries.

From the perspective of the United States, the Red Sea has long been considered a strategic transit corridor—an essential artery for global trade and energy flows. Approximately 10–15 percent of global seaborne commerce passes through the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. The wave of Houthi attacks beginning in late 2023 raised immediate alarms in Washington, not only over regional stability but also over potential disruptions to global supply chains and oil markets. Indeed, oil prices experienced upward volatility following several Houthi strikes, as commercial tankers were forced to reroute away from the contested waters.

In response, the United States rapidly augmented its naval presence and launched Operation *Prosperity Guardian*, a multinational task force of 22 countries aimed at ensuring freedom of navigation. The U.S. framing of this initiative was unequivocally defensive: it sought to protect international shipping and deter further aggression by a non-state actor openly supported by Iran. Additionally, U.S. military assets—most notably the USS *Carney* and USS *Mason*—had themselves been targeted by Houthi missile and drone attacks, further reinforcing the imperative for American action. The Biden administration, initially hesitant to expand its engagement in Yemen following efforts to de-escalate the civil conflict, recalibrated its posture in response to what was perceived as an Iranian-orchestrated threat to international norms and commercial security.

In doing so, Washington also sought to reaffirm its role as a regional security guarantor, particularly in the eyes of Gulf allies who had grown skeptical of U.S. resolve following prior retrenchment. Official statements from both the Pentagon and NATO repeatedly called on Iran to restrain its proxies, emphasizing that continued provocations would incur direct consequences. This assertive posture suggested a renewed willingness by the United States to counter Iranian influence, not only in the Persian Gulf, but in the broader maritime theatre of the Red Sea.

Israel's strategic rationale for engaging the Houthi threat is equally compelling. The Red Sea serves as Israel's southern maritime lifeline, linking its port at Eilat to Asian trade routes and the broader Indian Ocean. Historically, Israel's national security doctrine has treated access to the Red Sea as vital—as evidenced by the role maritime blockades played in triggering the 1967 Six-Day War. More recently, Israeli infrastructure projects, such as the Eilat–Ashkelon pipeline, have sought to exploit Red Sea access for energy transit to Europe, rendering the security of this waterway indispensable.

The emergence of a hostile, Iranian-aligned actor capable of threatening Red Sea navigation and even launching long-range missile strikes into Israeli territory represents a strategic red line for Jerusalem. Since November 2023, the Houthis have claimed responsibility for launching over 100 drones and ballistic missiles toward Israeli territory or vessels presumed to be linked to Israel. In response, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have conducted precision airstrikes on military targets in Yemen—including the Sanaa International Airport and key Houthi infrastructure in Hodeidah and Bajil. These strikes, spanning more than 1,600 kilometres, illustrate a significant expansion of Israel's operational reach.

Israeli military and political leaders have framed these operations as both pre-emptive and retaliatory, aimed at degrading the Houthis' strike capabilities and

deterring further aggression. The employment of advanced air defense systems such as Arrow-3 to intercept long-range missiles over the Red Sea further underscores the gravity with which Israel treats the Houthi threat. Moreover, Israeli officials have publicly linked these operations to the broader struggle against Iran's regional network of proxies. By targeting Houthi assets, Israel is sending a strategic message to Tehran: the geographic distance of a proxy does not ensure immunity from Israeli retaliation.

This emerging theatre also reflects a wider shift in Israel's security doctrine—from one focused primarily on territorial defense to one that increasingly incorporates maritime and regional force projection. The strikes in Yemen have coincided with quiet diplomatic overtures and security coordination between Israel and several Gulf Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Although Riyadh has not formally endorsed Israeli military action, the absence of public condemnation—beyond rhetorical denunciations from predictable quarters—suggests tacit acceptance. This convergence of interests reflects a shared imperative to counter Iranian expansionism, particularly via non-state actors.

Furthermore, the Red Sea's geostrategic significance extends beyond the immediate maritime arena. The waterway connects to the Suez Canal, which serves as a critical trade route for both Israel and Europe, and it facilitates U.S. naval mobility between the Mediterranean and the Arabian Gulf. Disruptions to Red Sea transit routes, as witnessed during the height of Houthi activity, forced some shipping companies to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope—incurring delays and increased costs. For U.S. and Israeli policymakers, ensuring the continued operability of this corridor is not merely an economic concern, but a matter of regional stability and global credibility.

Operational coordination between the U.S., Israel, and European allies in the Red Sea theatre has also deepened. U.S. Navy vessels have assisted in intercepting projectiles headed toward Israel, and CENTCOM has integrated missile defense networks to counter multi-vector threats. The large-scale drone and missile barrage launched by Iran and its proxies in April 2024—intercepted largely through joint defensive efforts—highlights the growing interoperability among allied forces in this volatile environment. These developments bolster Israel's long-standing argument that it is not merely a recipient of Western security support, but a proactive contributor to collective stability.

Finally, the joint operations in the Red Sea signal an evolving strategic architecture in the Middle East. The once-divisive maritime boundary is increasingly becoming a zone of shared interest among Israel, the United States, and moderate Sunni Arab states. The alignment of military action, intelligence cooperation, and defensive integration in this domain reflects a broader recalibration of regional alliances in the post-Abraham Accords era. In this context, countering the Houthi threat serves not only immediate tactical objectives, but also contributes to the gradual construction of a cooperative security framework aimed at curbing Iranian influence across the wider region.

Risks and Rewards of the Red Sea Campaign

What initially appeared as a spillover from the Gaza war has evolved into a persistent low-intensity conflict that spans vast distances—from the ports of Yemen to the airspace over Tel Aviv. Since late 2023, the coordinated military campaign by the United States and Israel against Yemen's Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) has illuminated both the tactical opportunities and strategic dangers inherent in the region's increasingly interconnected proxy conflict landscape.

From a tactical perspective, the campaign has achieved several measurable successes. U.S. and Israeli strikes have destroyed dozens of Houthi launch platforms, weapons convoys, and drone manufacturing sites. Critical infrastructure supporting Houthi operations—including radar installations and Sanaa's international airport—has been severely degraded. Despite the frequent launch of missiles, drones, and naval mines, international shipping in the Red Sea has largely continued, with no major commercial vessel losses to date. The proactive military response by the U.S. and its partners has likely prevented a more severe disruption to maritime trade and reinforced deterrence against Iran's use of asymmetric proxies.

Strategically, these operations have demonstrated that any attempt by Tehran to leverage the Gaza conflict as a pretext for attacks on Israel or U.S. forces will not go unanswered. In this sense, the campaign may have imposed a short-term cost on Iran's regional strategy, reinforcing deterrence without precipitating open warfare.

However, the situation is fraught with risks. The ongoing cycle of reciprocal escalation between the Houthis and the U.S.–Israeli coalition carries the inherent danger of strategic miscalculation. While Iran has so far refrained from direct engagement, episodes such as the Houthis' May 2025 missile strike near Ben Gurion Airport—and subsequent Israeli threats against Iran—have brought the region perilously close to a broader conflagration. The potential for rapid escalation remains, particularly if either side misinterprets the other's intentions or crosses a previously unstated red line.

Additionally, the humanitarian impact within Yemen presents an escalating concern. Airstrikes have reportedly caused civilian casualties, and critical infrastructure—such as power stations and industrial sites—has been targeted. While the exiled Yemeni government and regional actors often place responsibility on the Houthis for provoking such reprisals, the reality remains that the civilian population is enduring renewed violence on top of a protracted civil war. Strategically, there is a well-documented risk that airpower alone may not compel surrender from ideologically committed actors. The Houthis, who portray their campaign as both a resistance effort on behalf of Palestine and a fight for survival against foreign aggression, are unlikely to be deterred solely by punitive measures. Their continued reliance on asymmetric tactics—including low-cost drones, naval mines, and explosive boats—ensures their capacity to inflict disruption and attract international attention even in the face of sustained bombardment.

Looking ahead, the challenge for both the United States and Israel lies in calibrating their use of force with diplomatic flexibility. On the military front, further investments in

cost-effective defensive systems—such as directed-energy weapons or enhanced electronic warfare capabilities—may be necessary to counter inexpensive aerial threats without exhausting high-value interceptors. At the same time, diplomatic innovation will be essential. Mediation efforts, such as Oman’s successful negotiation for the release of the *Galaxy Leader* crew, suggest that quiet diplomacy remains a viable pathway. The Houthis themselves have signalled that their campaign is contingent upon the continuation of hostilities in Gaza. Should a ceasefire or political resolution emerge, the rationale underpinning their attacks could dissipate. This interconnection underscores a broader strategic truth: the regional proxy dynamics—especially those involving Iran—cannot be isolated from the unresolved core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Neither Washington nor Jerusalem envisions a re-entry into Yemen’s civil war. Instead, the desired outcome appears to be containment: maintaining pressure to limit the Houthis’ capacity for regional disruption, while leaving open the possibility for a political settlement that may, over time, reduce their strategic relevance. In this regard, the current campaign aligns with broader U.S. and Israeli goals of reasserting freedom of navigation, demonstrating resolve to Iran and its allies, and consolidating strategic coordination among regional partners.

Indeed, the operations have reinforced important geostrategic relationships. Israel has deepened its operational coordination with U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), including integration of air and missile defence networks. Quiet understandings with Gulf Arab states—particularly Bahrain and, to some extent, Saudi Arabia—suggest that shared concerns over Iranian proxy activity are producing tacit forms of cooperation. Israel’s operational reach into Yemen has also served as a demonstration of its deterrent capability, reaffirming its capacity to project power well beyond its immediate borders.

Nonetheless, the situation remains fluid. As of mid-2025, Israel continues its campaign in Gaza, even as it defends against Houthi missiles from Yemen. The United States, while attempting to avoid entanglement in Yemen’s internal conflict, maintains an active military posture in the Red Sea. The pattern of escalation since late 2023 illustrates how a localized conflict—such as the war in Gaza—can rapidly metastasize into a multi-theatre confrontation involving state and non-state actors across thousands of kilometers.

This is not without historical precedent. During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Arab forces mined the Bab al-Mandab to block Israeli shipping. Today, Houthi drones and mines are deployed under the banner of solidarity with Palestine. While the actors and technologies have changed, Israel’s strategic imperative remains consistent: secure access to the Red Sea, deter hostile encirclement, and prevent maritime isolation.

For the United States, the Red Sea theatre epitomizes the challenge of sustaining regional order and international norms without becoming drawn into protracted conflict. Through a combination of targeted strikes and multinational naval coordination, Washington and its allies have so far managed to suppress the most dangerous elements of the Houthi threat. However, whether this posture can induce

behavioural change—or merely entrench a new equilibrium of low-grade, chronic hostility—remains uncertain.

Ultimately, the future trajectory of this conflict will depend on whether hard power can be complemented by diplomatic acuity. The stakes are high: the integrity of global maritime trade, the balance of power vis-à-vis Iran, and the broader question of how to contain proxy warfare in a deeply fractured region. As one senior Gulf official observed, “The freedom of navigation in the Red Sea is an international demand.” In that sense, the United States and Israel have concluded—implicitly with regional endorsement—that ensuring this freedom may, at times, require decisive force. Whether such force leads to sustainable deterrence or prolonged entanglement will depend on the wisdom with which it is applied, and on the capacity of all actors to navigate not only the waters of the Red Sea, but the deeper geopolitical currents shaping the Middle East.

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