

In the undeclared war in the Red Sea and Yemen, the U.S. has misjudged the Houthis, "*part of the Bakil confederation, the largest tribal group in Yemen"*
, as it previously had misjudged the Taliban. In doing so, Washington has provided the Houthis, as it did the Taliban, an opportunity to "bleed' America of money and material, undermining an aging U.S. military machine already overstretched, underfunded, undermanned, and lacking the means to successfully fight wars simultaneously in Europe and Asia. This is the real threat Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea pose to U.S. national security, writes Joseph E Fallon.

In "Who are the Houthis and why are they attacking Red Sea ships?," January 15, 2024, the BBC reported "*Following the start of the war in the Gaza Strip, the Houthis started firing drones and missiles towards Israel. Most have been intercepted. On 19 November, the Houthis hijacked a commercial ship in the Red Sea and have since attacked more than two dozen others with drones, missiles and speed boats. US-led naval forces thwarted many of the attacks. The Houthis say they are targeting ships which are Israeli-owned, flagged or operated, or which are heading to Israeli ports. However, many have no connections with Israel."*

The attacks have disrupted international shipping through the Suez Canal, Red Sea, and Gulf of Aden. The analysis by Noah Berman of the Council on Foreign Relations, "How Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea Threaten Global Shipping," updated January 12, 2024, explains the impact the attacks are having on international trade and the world's economy.Ã‚Ã‚Ã‚ÂÂ *"The Red Sea is one of the most important arteries in the global shipping system, with one-third of all container traffic flowing through it. Any sustained disruption in trade there could send a ripple effect of higher costs throughout the world economy. This is particularly true of energy: 12 percent of seaborne oil and 8 percent of liquified natural gas (LNG) transit the Suez Canal. Avoiding the Red Sea means abandoning one of the most common global shipping routes from Asia to Europe. Indeed, 40 percent of Asia-Europe trade normally transits the sea. Ships shunning the Red Sea will have to instead sail around the Horn of Africa [sic], which can cost $1 million more round trip in additional fuel costs. Still, more than one hundred fifty commercial ships have chosen the longer route since November. On the other hand, insurance premiums for ships*

using the Red Sea have shot up nearly tenfold since the attacks began... Some shipping companies are already passing down these expenses. France's CMA CGM, the world's second-largest shipper by market share, recently announced that it would double its rates for shipping from Asia to Europe...Fearing attacks, major shippers including global leader A.P. MÃ¸ller-MÃ¦rsk have announced plans to avoid the Red Sea and the Suez Canalâ€”diverting some $200 billion in trade - opting to take the longer route around Africa's Cape of Good Hope."

In response to these attacks, on Thursday, January 11, 2024, American and British forces bombed more than 60 Houthi targets across 28 sites in Yemen. NPR reported "*The targets include radar sites, drone launchers and drone storage sites â€” chosen in an effort to 'degrade' the Houthis' ability to attack shipping.*
" President Biden declared that "
the strikes will continue 'as necessary' to protect the free flow of international commerce." (
And they have, by USA alone to date.)

The result? The Army Times reported "*Houthi militants are continuing attacks in the Red Sea in spite of a joint U.S.-U.K. strike on a dozen targets in Yemen on Thursday, a senior Pentagon official told reporters on Friday...The Navy on Friday sent a message warning U.S. shipping companies to stay out of the region in the wake of the strikes."*

On Monday, January 15, 2024, Stars and Stripes reporte "*Houthi rebels fired a missile, striking a U.S.-owned ship [Gibraltar Eagle] Monday just off the coast of Yemen in the Gulf of Aden, less than a day after they launched an anti-ship cruise missile toward an American destroyer in the Red Sea...The ship has reported no injuries or significant damage and is continuing its journey, Central Command said...The attack on the Gibraltar Eagle, later claimed by the Houthis, further escalates tensions gripping the Red Sea after American-led strikes on the rebels."*

Then on Thursday, January 18, 2024, BBC reported "*Houthi forces launched a new missile attack on a US-owned vessel on Thursday, after President Joe Biden said American strikes have not deterred the militants' campaign in the Red Sea."*

Clausewitz wrote "*War is nothing but a continuation of politics with the admixture of other means...The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose. "M* erely reacting to an enemy's tactics is not a policy. It is not a strategy. It is a sign of confusion at the highest levels of the U.S.

government.

As the BBC noted of the bombings - "*at best it's a deterrent. It will not eliminate the threat.*" What was its purpose? To stop Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea? That failed. To destroy Houthi weapons? Iran will supply the Houthis with more. To destabilize the Houthi regime? That could destabilize the region and unsettle Western economies.

Bombing alone does not defeat an enemy. In World War II, Germany's bombing of London did not defeat the British, nor did British bombing of German cities defeat Germany. In the Vietnam War, U.S. bombings of Hanoi did not defeat North Vietnam. U.S. bombings in Afghanistan did not defeat the Taliban.

And introducing ground troops into North Yemen would enflame the Middle East. It would be Afghanistan 2.0. Lessons not learned. Once again "waist deep in the big muddy."

As the BBC reported January 15, 202, "*..years of air strikes and ground fighting have not dislodged the Houthis from most of the territory they seized."*

There are four points Washington appears not to have adequately considered before starting a bombing campaign.

First, the Houthi are not Iranian proxies or puppets. They are allies of Iran, but it's an alliance of convenience to insure the regime survival of both. While Houthis and Iranians are Shia, they are of different sects. Houthis are Zaydi Fivers, not Iranian Twelvers. As Luca Nevola of ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) wrote in "Why Are Yemen's Houthis Attacking Ships in the Red Sea?," January 5, 2024, "*Perhaps it's true that Houthi ideology is moving in a different direction from the traditional Zaydi beliefs, but the Houthis hold firmly onto their Zaydi faith, and there are major doctrinal differences between the Zaydi and Twelver sects."*

The Houthis are independent actors, free to negotiate a deal, which is what the Houthis and Saudia Arabia are attempting to do. Which is why the Saudis did not participate in the U.S.-led

military operation. On the contrary, the day after the airstrikes, Reuters reported "*Saudi Arabia called for restraint and 'avoiding escalation' in light of the air strikes launched by the United States and Britain against sites linked to the Houthi movement in Yemen...[and] was closely monitoring the situation with 'great concern'...The chief negotiator for the Houthis, Mohammed Abdulsalam, said on Thursday the group's attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea do not threaten its peace talks with Saudi Arabia.*"

Second, while the rhetoric for attacking ships in the Red Sea is solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, the reality is the Houthi regime is trying to deflect popular discontent with their administration in de facto North Yemen. "*In the weeks and months before the eruption of the Gaza conflict, unrest had started building up in Houthi-controlled areas demanding payment of salaries and venting public discontent at poor governance. Teachers went on strike. Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis took to the streets to celebrate Yemen's 26 September 1962 'revolution day,' sacred to the regime that preceded the Houthis. The Houthis repressed the demonstrations and arrested hundreds of people.*"

Such discontent means the Houthis need to reach a deal with Saudi Arabia sooner rather than later. The massive celebration on "revolution day," September 26th, may suggest popular support for the restoration of an independent North Yemen.

Third, Houthis, like the Taliban, are not ignorant tribesmen. On January 5, 2024, Luca Nevola wrote "*This is actually the Houthis' fourth wave of attacks in the waterway, which is the conduit for at least one-tenth of world seaborne trade. In the first, between 2015 and 2016, the Houthis relied on shelling from the shoreline after they won control of the western Red Sea coast and captured the old Yemeni army stockpile of anti-ship missiles. From 2017 onward, the Houthis began relying more on water-borne improvised explosive devices, known as WBIEDs. Then in 2020, and peaking in 2021, the Houthis expanded the use of WBIED attacks, followed by a truce in 2022. It's not just the frequency of events that makes this recent escalation unprecedented â€” or that one of Israel's missile interceptions took place outside the Earth's atmosphere, the first recorded combat in outer space â€” but also the fact that they now include commercial ship hijackings and the first use of long-range ballistic and cruise missiles fired toward the distant southern port of Eilat in Israel. Another new element is that the Houthis now have their own anti-ship missiles and drone technology to conduct these maritime attacks.*"

Fourth, and most importantly for the national security of the U.S., dealing with the Houthis principally by military means, shooting down Houthi missiles and drones, justified acts of self-defense, and launching a retaliatory bombing campaign against Houthi targets on the ground, is a financial war of attrition the U.S. is losing.

As early as December 20, 2023, Politico had reported "*As American warships rack up kills against Houthi drones and missiles in the Red Sea, Pentagon officials are increasingly alarmed not just at the threat to U.S. naval forces and international shipping â€" but at the growing cost of keeping them safe...The cost of using expensive naval missiles â€" which can run up to $2.1 million a shot â€" to destroy unsophisticated Houthi drones â€" estimated at a few thousand dollars each â€" is a growing concern...'That quickly becomes a problem because the most benefit, even if we do shoot down their incoming missiles and drones, is in their favor,' said Mick Mulroy, a former DOD official and CIA officer."*

In the U.S. bombing campaign of January 11, 2024, "*At least 80 Tomahawks were fired as part of the strikes, according to Military.com. C*
ost of one Tomahawk cruise missile is about $2 million. Double the cost as the missiles now need to be replaced.

According to The Maritime Post, "*Since an aircraft carrier by itself has the limited ability to defend itself, it relies on other classes of ships for defense against missiles, aircraft, and submarines. A carrier strike group usually consists of at least 1 cruiser, at least 2 destroyers and sometimes a supply ship or a submarine. [As of July 25, 2021] Depending on the exact configuration of a carrier strike group, its operational cost is anywhere between $6 million to $8 million per day."*

Since October 16, 2023, the U.S. has deployed two carrier strike groups, Ford and Eisenhower, in the Middle East. Washington is "hemorrhaging" money it cannot afford.

As Politico reported "*The heavy deployment of warships to the region has created a complex balancing act for the Navy, which has struggled with getting ships out to sea on time." There is also "a wider issue with repair and maintenance in the Navy that has seen warships languish pierside for months after they had been scheduled to leave.* " This bears an eerie similarity to the last days of the Soviet navy.

Then there is the weapon shortage the U.S. military faces due to the Biden Administration transferring American weapons to Ukraine. At the January 2023 Navy Surface Association National Symposium in Arlington Virginia, the Secretary of the Navy, Carlos Del Toro, told reporters "*Within the next six months, the United States Navy may need to decide whether to*

arm itself or Ukraine due to a reported weapons shortage."

On January 11, 2024, CNN reported the Inspector General found "*The Pentagon did not properly track $1 billion worth of military equipment sent to Ukraine." T*
he endemic corruption in Ukraine seems to be contagious.

Therefore, it is in the U.S. national interest for Washington to resolve the crisis in the Red Sea, not by air strikes, but by supporting Saudi Arabia's peace negotiations with the Houthis. For the threat posed by the Houthis is to Saudi Arabia, not the U.S.

Iran lies to the east of Saudi Arabia. The Persian Gulf, 35 miles wide at its narrowest, separates Teheran's missiles from Riyahd's oil fields. By gaining influence in Syria and Iraq to the north and with Houthis to the southwest, Iran threatens Saudi Arabia, its religious as well as political adversary, on three fronts.

In many ways, Iran's sectarian alignment of Syria, Iraq, and Houthi North Yemen against Saudi Arabia parallels Nasser of Egypt's secular alignment of those same countries against Saudi Arabia in the 1960s under the banner of Arab nationalism.

The weak link for Iran today, as it was for Egypt in the 1960s, is North Yemen.

How Riyadh resolved Egypt's threat is a guide for negotiations with the Houthis.

On September 26, 1962, Muhammad al-Badr, the king and the imam of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen (North Yemen) was overthrown in a military coup by pro-Nasser officers who proclaimed the Yemen Arab Republic. It unleashed eight years of civil war (1962-1970). Nasser supported the republicans with troops establishing an Egyptian presence on Saudi Arabia's southwest border. While Saudi Arabia supported the monarchists, in the end Riyadh cut a deal with the Yemen republican forces. Riyadh recognized the Yemen Arab Republic and extended that government millions of dollars in aid, which Cairo could not match, in exchange for withdrawal of Egyptian forces, and by extension Egyptian influence, from North Yemen.

The Houthis would like to rule all of Yemen. While their position in North Yemen is secure, they have been unable to establish a permanent presence in the rest of Yemen. While principally due to Saudi military intervention and financial assistance to the recognized government of Yemen based in Aden; there is also local opposition to the Houthis from tribes and Sunnis in South Yemen.

A negotiated agreement between the Saudis and the Houthis to end the Yemen Civil War could consist of the following.

The Saudis would recognize the Houthi regime and extend that government millions of dollars in assistance, which they desperately need, if the Houthis agreed:
* they would be the government of North Yemen based on its pre-1990 borders
* they recognize the independence of South Yemen based on its pre-1990 borders.
* they stop attacking ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.
* they allow Iran only a diplomatic and commercial presence in North Yemen.

If the U.S. could recognize the breakup of Ethiopia, Sudan, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union, Washington could recognize the breakup of Yemen.

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