

RED SEA FLASHPOINT: U.S. STRIKES HOUTHI TARGETS IN YEMEN AMID RENEWED ATTACKS ON GLOBAL SHIPPING

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The United States has carried out a fresh wave of airstrikes in Yemen, targeting sites controlled by the Iran-backed Houthi movement. The strikes, conducted in coordination with the United Kingdom and other international partners, come in response to renewed Houthi attacks on commercial vessels traversing the Red Sea one of the world's most critical maritime [...]

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The Houthis have claimed responsibility for these assaults, framing them as retaliation against Israeli actions in Gaza and as an expression of solidarity with the Palestinian

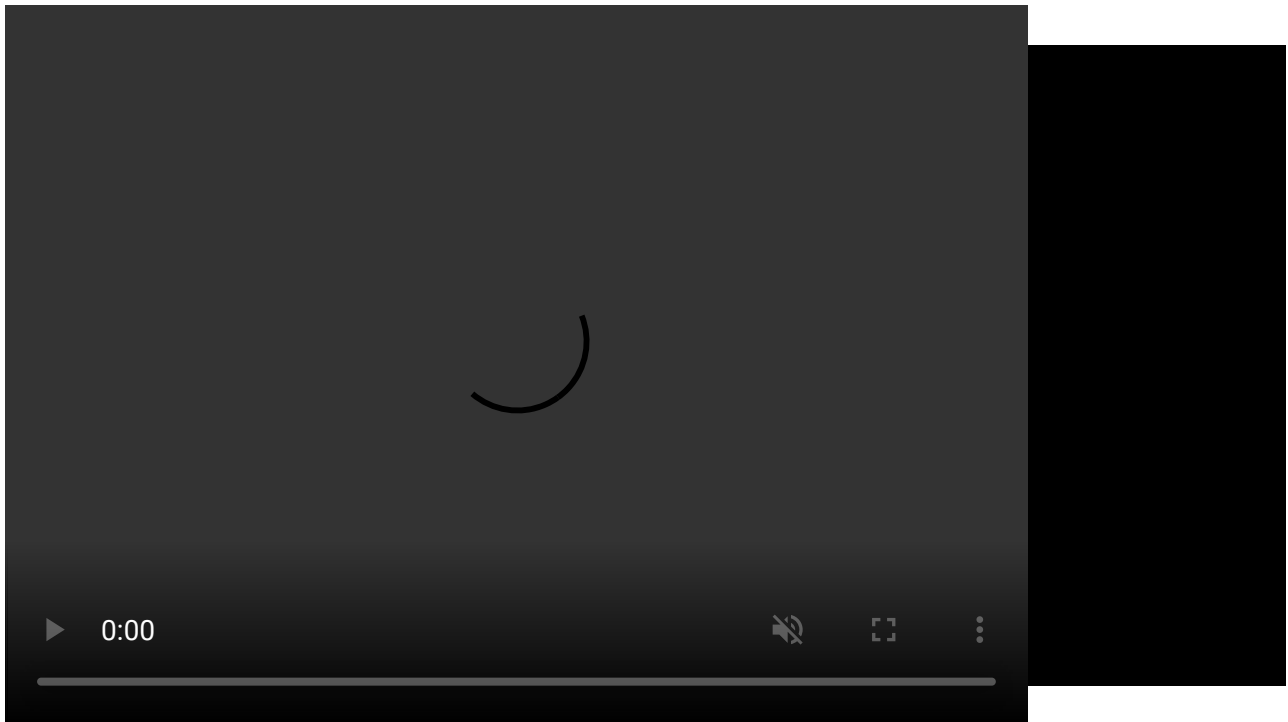
cause. In doing so, the group has once again propelled itself onto the center stage of global geopolitics, transforming the Red Sea into a volatile zone with far-reaching economic and legal implications. The Houthi movement, also known as Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), originated in the early 1990s in Yemen's northern highlands. Founded by Hussein al-Houthi, the group initially represented the grievances of Yemen's Zaidi Shia Muslim minority. Over time, the Houthis evolved from a socio-religious revivalist group into a potent armed faction and, eventually, a de facto governing authority in large parts of Yemen, including the capital, Sana'a.

The group maintains close ties to Iran and is widely considered a proxy force within Tehran's broader regional strategy. Alongside Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis form part of the so-called "axis of resistance" which is an informal coalition aimed at countering the influence of Israel and the United States in the Middle East. Coming back to the Red Sea, which connects the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal, serves as a vital lifeline for global commerce. More than 12 percent of global trade, including critical energy supplies, passes through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait at the southern end of the Red Sea.

Recent attacks by the Houthis have forced numerous commercial vessels to avoid the route altogether, opting instead for the far longer and costlier journey around the Cape of Good Hope. This rerouting has contributed to rising shipping costs, supply chain delays, and commodity price spikes, further straining a global economy already grappling with inflationary pressures.

In December 2023, in response to these growing threats, the United States and its allies launched Operation Prosperity Guardian. The operation is a multinational maritime security initiative designed to ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and adjacent waters. It operates under the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a 34-nation coalition headquartered in Bahrain.

The coalition's mandate is clear which is to protect international shipping, deter further Houthi aggression, and reinforce international legal norms. The operation has included naval escorts, intelligence sharing, surveillance flights, and targeted strikes against Houthi missile and drone launch sites.



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A LEGAL PERSPECTIVE: FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION AT STAKE

At the heart of this conflict lies a fundamental principle of international law i.e. freedom of navigation. This principle, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is also recognized as part of customary international law. Some of its key articles include Article 87 (freedom of the high seas), Article 58 (freedom in the exclusive economic zone), Article 36 (straits used for international navigation), and Article 38 (transit passage through straits)—explicitly guarantee the right of all ships, regardless of nationality, to move freely through international waters.

The Convention also safeguards the right of innocent passage through territorial seas and archipelagic waters under Articles 17 to 26 and 52. These rules are designed to balance the sovereign rights of coastal states with the global interest in unobstructed maritime transit.

Indeed, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has, in various rulings, affirmed freedom of navigation as a customary legal principle. From the 1949 Corfu Channel Case to more recent disputes, the ICJ has consistently emphasized that all states have a duty to respect free maritime transit even in times of political tension.

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There are questions about the effectiveness and sustainability of Operation Prosperity Guardian. While the coalition has enjoyed initial success in deterring some attacks, the Houthis have demonstrated a capacity for rapid adaptation, using drones, missiles, and asymmetric tactics to circumvent traditional naval defenses.

Moreover, the crisis complicates an already tense diplomatic environment. Efforts by the

U.S. and regional powers to broker a lasting ceasefire in Yemen may suffer setbacks. Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in Yemen remains dire, with millions still dependent on international aid—much of which also moves through maritime routes.

THE ROAD AHEAD

As Washington weighs its next steps, officials are emphasizing both deterrence and diplomacy. Yet with each missile launched and vessel diverted, the stakes grow higher. The crisis in the Red Sea is no longer a regional dispute—it is a test of the world's ability to uphold foundational norms of international law in the face of growing geopolitical fragmentation.

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