

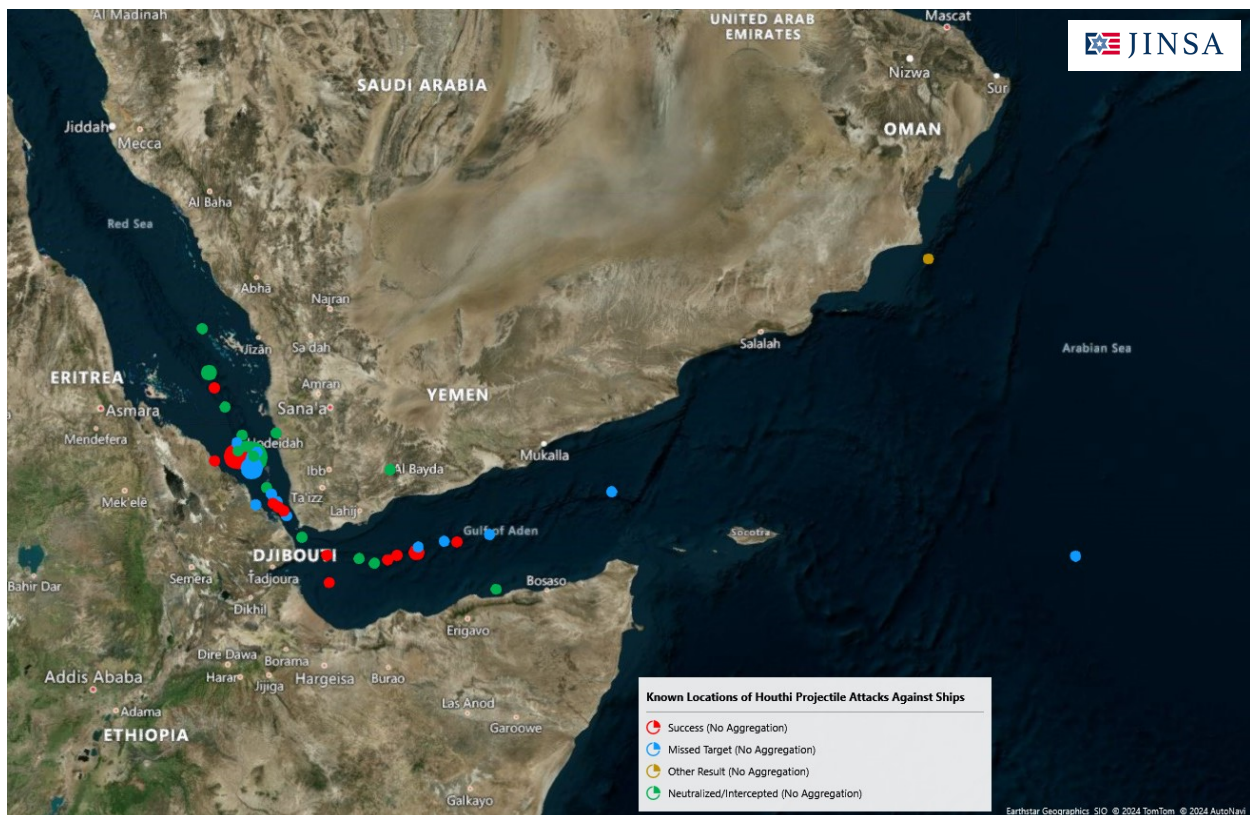


Houthis Turn Rarely Effective Strikes into Strategic Success

Ari Cicurel
Assistant Director of Foreign Policy

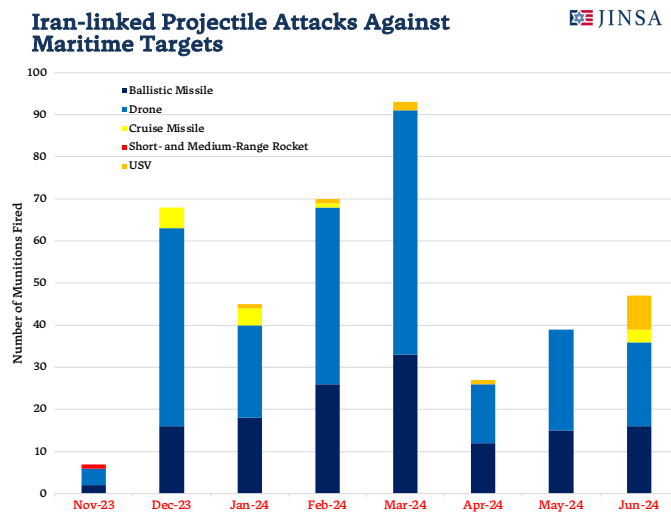
On June 19, the MV Tutor sank in the Red Sea after the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen launched an unmanned surface vessel (USV) that struck it the previous week. That this was only the second ship that has been sunk in almost 8 months—the first as the result of a USV attack—and only the thirty-sixth that has been hit after over 200 Houthi attacks only underscores that their strikes are rarely tactically effective. Yet, during June the Houthis have mounted an escalation against ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden—both in terms of the frequency of the attacks and the higher number that have hit their targets—yielding a high degree of strategic success by raising costs on shipping and undermining U.S. credibility.

While U.S. and partner forces have similarly intercepted a record number of Houthi drones and missiles this month, the United States has fallen into the Houthis' strategy of waging costly tit-for-tat attritional warfare since November 2023. Instead, the United States and its partners should expand more cost-effective defensive capabilities in the region—particularly using unmanned or Israeli-made platforms—and conduct more frequent, deadlier, and more destructive strikes against Houthi fighters, sensors, and command-and-control platforms in Yemen.

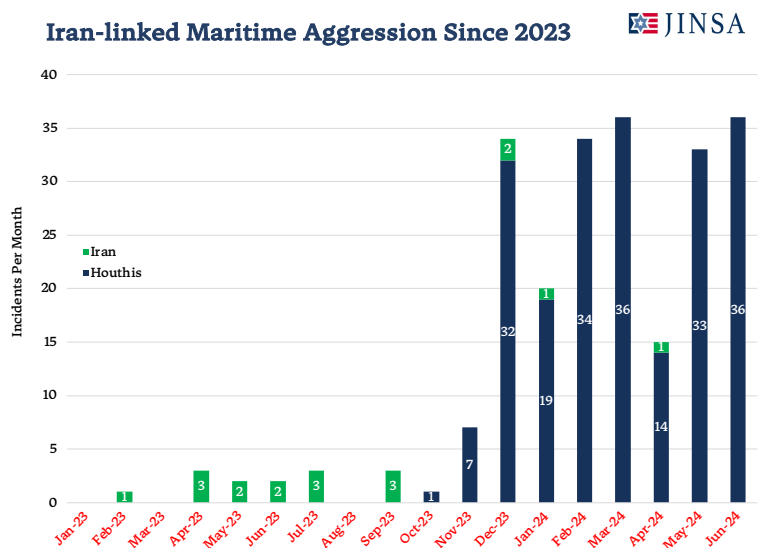
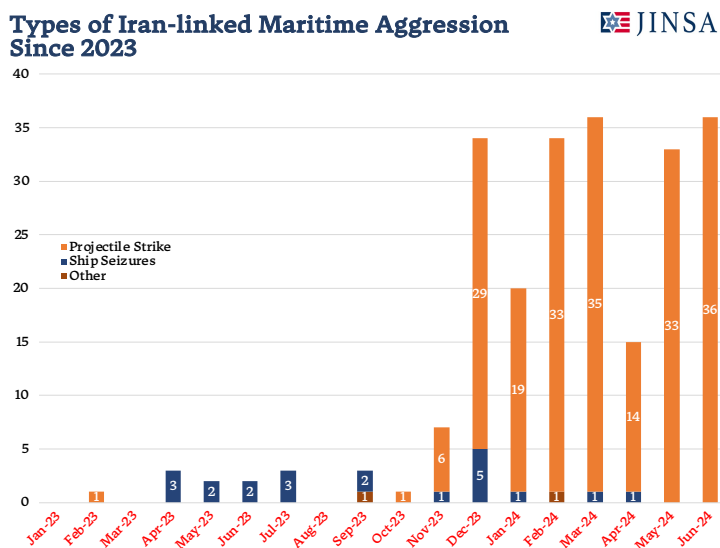


What Happened?

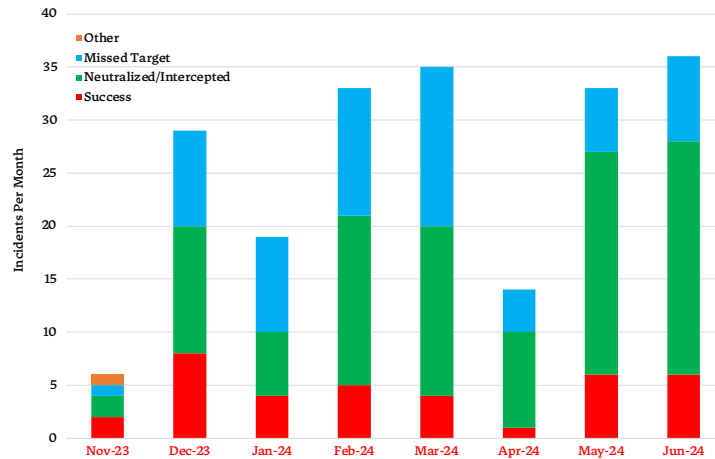
- Since the beginning of June, the Houthis have conducted at least thirty-six attacks against ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, including launching sixteen anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM), twelve drones, three anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), and six unmanned surface vessels (USV).
- » The Houthis have launched more projectiles in June than in April or May but have decreased the number of projectiles they have been firing over the past three months from the peak of over ninety projectiles in March and roughly seventy in December and February.



- » Whereas at the beginning of the war, the Iranian regime and the Houthis sought to seize commercial vessels in addition to launching projectiles at them, in recent months, Iran has shifted toward entirely relying upon the Houthis to conduct maritime aggression, and the Houthis have only done so by launching projectiles at ships.



- » While U.S. naval and air assets intercepted at least eighteen Houthi projectiles in June, the Houthis struck five ships, including the group's first successful strike using a USV since the war began, which caused the MV *Tutor* to sink on June 19.

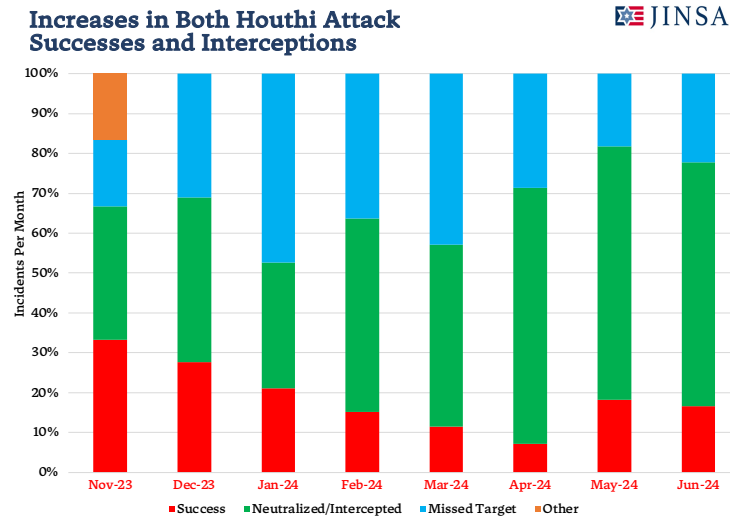


- In June, U.S. forces have launched thirty strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, primarily destroying drones, missiles, and launchers, as well as at least nine air defense radars, two Houthi patrol boats in the Red Sea, one ground control station, and one command-and-control node.

Why Is It Important?

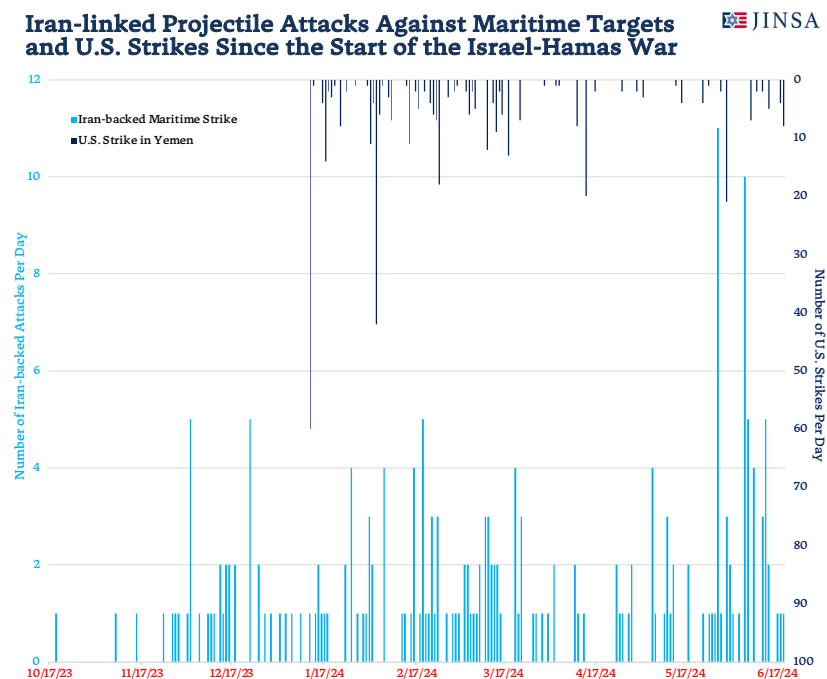
- Despite Houthi strikes rarely hitting their targets or causing substantial damage to them, the Iran-backed terrorist group in Yemen has achieved immense strategic success at raising costs on international shipping and undermining U.S. credibility. By increasing the number of attacks, the Houthis have substantially increased the number of successful strikes during June, even as the United States and partner forces have simultaneously intercepted more Houthi projectiles.
 - » The U.S. Navy has already faced its most sustained combat since World War II during the ongoing defensive operations to protect international waterways and offensive strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, but these efforts have neither deterred the group nor degraded its capacity to launch attacks.
- The Houthis have increased the total number of attacks in June and the number that hit their target, despite firing substantially fewer total projectiles this month compared to the peak in March.
 - » The thirty-six total incidents of maritime aggression that the Houthis have launched so far in June has already surpassed the previous peak of thirty-five attacks in March.
 - If the rate of attacks continues, the Houthis may launch roughly fifty maritime attacks by the end of the month.
 - » While Houthis' success rate of sixteen percent in June has been roughly similar to previous months, indicating that the Houthis have not notably improved their capabilities, the high rate of fire has provided them with more opportunities to successfully strike a target.
 - At the current rate of success, the Houthis may conduct roughly eight successful attacks by the end of the month, similar to the previous peak of eight successful strikes in December.
 - » The Houthis have launched over 200 attacks at ships in nearby waters, with only 36 involving at least one projectile striking a ship, U.S. and partner forces intercepting all of

the projectiles that the Houthis fired during 105 attacks, and sixty-four attacks missing the target entirely.



- U.S. and partner forces have intercepted more Houthi projectiles in May and June than any other month—with at least twenty interceptions during each month—and neutralized a greater percentage of the Houthi attacks since April than it had previously.
 - » U.S. and partner forces intercepted roughly sixty percent of the total Houthi projectile attacks in June, sixty-five percent in May, and sixty-four percent in April, up from between thirty to forty percent beforehand.
 - » Iran’s [withdrawal](#) on April 4 of the *Behshad*, a frigate previously deployed in the Red Sea that had reportedly been assisting the Houthis to target vessels in nearby waters, also likely degraded the Houthis ability to identify, track, and strike ships and made it easier for U.S. and partner forces to intercept them.
 - » However, the Houthis only need to strike a ship a single time in order to potentially render it inoperable.
 - Commercial shipping vessels are typically sparsely crewed and have limited ability to rapidly respond to attacks that strike the ship. Even a small projectile can destroy the power or emergency response capabilities of a much larger ship, preventing the crew from stopping it from sinking.
- Even with a relatively low degree of success, the Houthis have achieved immense strategic successes at raising costs on global shipping and undermining U.S. credibility.
 - » The failure to stop increasing Houthi aggression, not only undermines the credibility of this commitment to freedom of navigation in the Middle East, but globally. Given the fungibility of credibility and deterrence, the U.S. failure to uphold freedom of navigation also undermines its other commitments, including to partners and allies globally.
 - » By forcing shipping companies to either sail around Africa or pay higher insurance costs if they choose to transit the currently dangerous Red Sea, the Houthis have raised shipping [costs](#) that will pass on to consumers and deterred transit through the waterway.
 - Since the Houthis began their attacks in November 2023, shipping container traffic through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden decreased by approximately 67% and tanker traffic [fell](#) by roughly 50%, according to Windward, a maritime-intelligence company.

- Compared to sailing through the Red Sea, [alternative](#) shipping routes around Africa can add roughly 11,000 nautical miles, one to two weeks of transit time, and roughly \$1 million in fuel costs.
- Yet, for many shipping companies, the combined costs of potential dangers to crew members, damage to cargo, and added war risk insurance premiums make traveling around Africa cheaper than sailing through the more direct route in the Red Sea.
- The Houthis sinking of a second ship will likely increase costs on global shipping.
- While U.S. forces have primarily targeted Houthi projectiles and launchers, in June, the United States also conducted strikes on two occasions specifically against Houthi radars, and one strike each against a Houthi ground control station and a Houthi command-and-control node.
 - » Destroying the Houthi ground control station and the command-and-control node limits the Houthis ability to launch attacks and coordinate their defenses.
 - » The strikes against the radars were likely to prevent the Houthis from using the radars to track ships in nearby waters and/or to suppress Houthi air defenses in preparation for additional strikes against Houthi targets.
 - In either case, targeting the radars may better degrade the Houthis capability to launch attacks than previous efforts to destroy the group’s numerous and readily replaceable projectiles and launchers.
 - » The United States has conducted at least 450 strikes in Yemen since Houthi attacks against ships in nearby waters began in November 2023.
 - The twenty strikes that the United States has launched so far in June is on pace to roughly match the thirty-six strikes in April and twenty-eight in May but remains substantially lower than the peak of at least seventy strikes from January to March.



- By launching relatively cheap missiles and drones compared to U.S. interceptors, the Houthis’ strategy is to wage a war of attrition that the United States and its partners would not be able to sustain because of the unfavorable cost-curve.

- » While the Houthis previously had launched three reported USV attacks since the war began, the successful strike against the MV *Tudor* on June 12—the first USV to reach its target since the war began—demonstrated a capability that the Houthis could look to further exploit.
 - USVs pose a particular challenge because of the large number of the similarly looking dhows in Middle Eastern waters and the possibility of chippy waters hiding the small watercraft before they reach their targets.
 - While commercial vessels may carry water cannons to use against pirates, these are ineffective against remotely piloted watercraft.
- » In May, the Secretary of the U.S. Navy Carlos Del Toro [testified](#) that the United States has spent roughly \$1 billion on munitions that it used to protect ships in the Red Sea by launching over 450 airstrikes in Yemen and intercepting more than 200 Houthi drones and missiles.
 - The U.S. launches Standard Missile (SM)-2 missiles that cost \$2.4 million, SM-3 missiles that [cost](#) from \$9.7-\$27.9 million, and SM-6 missiles that cost \$3.9 million.
 - In contrast, the Houthis have [launched](#) missiles and drones that cost only tens of thousands of dollars.
- To expand the ability to identify, track, and intercept threats at sea, the United States and its partners need alternatives to the large naval platforms and aircraft it has heavily relied upon.
 - » U.S. Naval Forces Central Command’s (NAVCENT) Task Force 59 has significantly expanded maritime domain awareness in the Middle East, but the task force currently [includes](#) only 50 of the 100 USVs that U.S. officials planned to deploy by the end of the summer in 2023, with the United States providing half of the platforms.
 - Unmanned surface vessels minimize the risks to American personnel, allowing them to operate more freely than crewed ships as Iran conducts unsafe naval maneuvers designed to harass and dissuade ships from traveling in international waterways.
 - The launch of Task Force 59 has coincided with a similar [Navy-wide effort](#) to expand the use of unmanned systems.
- Instead of waging a war of attrition that suits the strategy of Tehran and its proxies, credible U.S. threats of force have historically had greater success changing the Iranian regime’s.
 - » In 2011-2012, Iran quickly backed down from its threats to close the Strait of Hormuz after the Obama administration [declared](#) a strait closure to be a “red line” and sent a carrier strike group through the strait.
 - » During the Iran-Iraq War, in 1988, the United States [used force](#) against Iranian naval ships that were harassing and attacking ships in the Arabian Gulf, including sinking an Iranian frigate, a missile boat, three speedboats, and two oil platforms. Iran ceased its malign naval activity after the strong U.S. display of force.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States and its partners should continue launching increasingly frequent, deadly, and destructive strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen so long as the Iran-backed group attacks ships or other interests in the Middle East.
 - » Beyond degrading the Houthis’ missiles and drone arsenals that it uses to launch attacks against ships in the Red Sea, coalition efforts should focus on targeting operational

leaders, radars or other sensors, and command-and-control centers that the terrorist group uses to maintain power over western Yemen.

- The Pentagon should deploy additional maritime domain sensors to the Middle East, including unmanned systems to Task Force 59.
- The U.S. Navy should expand support for research and development on cost-effective means of neutralizing air and maritime domain projectile threats against ships, including through the use of unmanned platforms, and work with Task Force 59 to implement possible solutions.
- The Department of Defense should consider purchasing Israel's maritime variant of the Iron Dome, C-Dome, which launches Barak missile interceptors that cost only \$500,000 dollars, a small fraction of the price of the U.S. Standard Missiles.
- The Department of Defense should explore where Israel has capabilities that could be integrated into Operation Prosperity Guardian and other preexisting multinational defense organizations in the Middle East, including the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), specifically Combined Task Force (CTF) 153 for Red Sea security, and the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC).
- CENTCOM should develop a concept of operations (CONOPs) for implementing [integrated air and missile defenses](#) (IAMD) in the Middle East using U.S. air and naval platforms already deployed to the region as well as U.S. partner systems.
 - » This plan should build the DEFEND Act's requirement in the FY 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, which was inspired by a [JINSA report](#), for the Department of Defense to develop a strategy for integrating Middle East air defenses into a regional network.
- Congress should also require the Defense Department to formulate a strategy that builds out an integrated maritime domain awareness and operations network among America's partners in the Middle East.
 - » This strategy should include sharing sensor data so that all partners have full maritime domain awareness to provide earlier detection and longer tracking of possible threats.