Preventing Iran's Weaponization of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait

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On July 27, the foreign minister of the UN-recognized Yemeni government warned that the Houthis were looking to copy Iran's approach in the Strait of Hormuz and disrupt shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. After puzzlingly not joining Iranian reprisals during Operation Epic Fury, the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen have indeed opened a second front in the Middle East, moving from bellicose rhetoric to strikes on both Red Sea shipping and Saudi oil infrastructure. President Donald Trump set a red line on July 23 that "if they do this again, the U.S. will hold Iran responsible, in that the Houthis are a Surrogate and/or Proxy of Iran, and major military punishment will be inflicted upon Iran and, of course, the Houthis, themselves." The Houthis continued their aggression after Trump's edict; the United States must now take action to prevent both the Houthis and Tehran from weaponizing the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

A Houthi closure of Bab el-Mandeb, on top of Iran's existing closure of the Strait of Hormuz, would choke two of the world's most vital shipping lanes at once, overextend American forces already committed to the Hormuz mission, and hand Tehran outsized leverage over global energy. It would also demonstrate to far more capable adversaries, including China, that Iran and even its smaller proxies can outlast and thwart U.S. military pressure. Beijing would draw a direct lesson that the United States can be fought to a stalemate by an opponent willing to accept sustained economic pain, a template China could apply to a blockade or invasion scenario in the Taiwan Strait. That demonstration would freeze the current conflict and erode the domestic and international support the United States needs to sustain operations against Iran.

The United States should act now to stop a Houthi blockade of a second critical waterway instead of confronting it after the fact. Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz alone has proven difficult to resolve. The United States waited 16 months to launch an offensive campaign against the Houthis' prior Red Sea disruption, a delay that made compelling them to stand down far harder.

To prevent the Houthis from shutting down another vital waterway, the United States should organize its regional partners now to enforce an air, land, and sea blockade of Houthi-controlled Yemen and strike the coastal launchers, radars, and other assets along Yemen's Red Sea coast that the group is already using to threaten shipping and Saudi territory. That coalition should also draw in U.S. partners from outside the Middle East, such as Greece, whose Patriot battery in Saudi Arabia already helped intercept Houthi missiles and drones aimed at the kingdom's energy infrastructure.

An Escalating Southern Front

Despite years of Iranian arming and a record of prior aggression against multiple adversaries, the Houthis stayed out of the fight through the war's first phase, limiting themselves to bellicose rhetoric even as the Strait of Hormuz became the central point of U.S.-Iranian confrontation. However, that restraint has broken down since July 13, and, for the first time since the war with Iran began in February, the Houthis are escalating along another front in the Middle East.

Since Saudi forces fired on an Iranian plane approaching Sanaa airport on July 13 and the Houthis retaliated with a missile and drone attack on Abha International Airport in southern Saudi Arabia, the group has declared a blockade against Saudi Arabia, fired at oil tankers in the Red Sea, and struck Aramco oil facilities in Jizan and Yanbu directly, working alongside Iran's effective shutdown of the Strait of Hormuz to drive up oil prices. The group is also reportedly considering imposing a toll on travel through the waterway, copying Iranian efforts in the Strait of Hormuz. Saudi and Yemeni-government counterstrikes have not deterred the campaign, and Iran-backed militias in Iraq widened the pressure further by striking targets in Saudi Arabia on July 27–28, including the Abqaiq oil processing facility on July 27.

The Houthis have moved from threat to action against Red Sea shipping. Reuters reported on July 16 that Tehran had instructed the group to prepare to block shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait if the United States targeted Iran's power infrastructure. Since July 22, the Houthis have fired at four tankers in the Red Sea, three of them Saudi-flagged, and the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) or Saudi officials confirmed hits on three. Although the Houthis maintained that they have not yet imposed a full blockade on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait itself, these attacks have already escalated pressure on the kingdom and global markets.

The Houthis have also struck Saudi Arabia's own territory directly. On July 25, the group struck Aramco facilities in Jizan and Yanbu with missiles and drones, setting the Jizan refinery on fire. A Greek Patriot battery, stationed in Saudi Arabia since 2021 to help protect the kingdom's energy infrastructure, intercepted two of the ballistic missiles aimed at the Yanbu refinery and shot down a separate drone, marking Greece's first direct engagement with Houthi fire in the current war. The attack on Yanbu struck the export corridor Saudi Arabia has relied on to route crude around the closed Strait of Hormuz, and Brent crude surged past $100 a barrel in the aftermath. Iran-backed aggression widened further on July 27, when Iranian proxies in Iraq launched drones that hit the Abqaiq oil processing facility, causing a major fire and prompting Aramco to suspend operations at the site.

Strikes against the Houthis have not deterred the group from firing. The Saudi-led coalition struck Houthi targets in the port city of Hodeidah on July 24, hitting a naval base and a military camp on Kamaran Island in addition to port and telecommunications facilities. The Houthis responded with the Aramco strikes the next day rather than standing down. Yemen's internationally recognized government also struck Houthi missile and drone launch sites and arms depots in the Marib and al-Jawf provinces on July 26, its own offensive strikes against the group, but the Houthis have shown no sign of curtailing their campaign since.

The Danger of a Two Chokepoint War

A Houthi blockade of Bab el-Mandeb would compound the danger Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz already poses by overextending American forces while cutting off the alternative trade routes that partners opened through the Red Sea. Closing a second chokepoint would also hand Iran greater leverage over the United States and its regional partners, while demonstrating to far more capable adversaries, including China, that Iran and even its smaller proxies can outlast and thwart U.S. military pressure. That demonstration would further freeze the conflict, push regional states toward greater hedging between Washington and Tehran, and erode the domestic and international support the United States needs to sustain operations against Iran.

The Houthis have already proven both the willingness and the ability to mount persistent attacks on regional targets, having launched more than 4,700 missiles, drones, and rockets against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates during the Saudi-led coalition's 2015-2022 war, according to JINSA's Iran Projectile Tracker. The group fired more than 1,000 missiles and drones against U.S. forces, Israel, and commercial shipping since Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel initiated a regional war.

Economic Disruption

A closure would carry economic costs that reach far beyond the region. Shipping traffic through the Bab el-Mandeb remains down 48 percent in June 2026 compared to June 2023, even after the Houthis halted consistent attacks in 2025, and a restart of attacks would drive transit even lower. Saudi Arabia would lose the Yanbu export corridor to circumvent the Strait of Hormuz, which was moving roughly 4.7 million barrels of crude per day as of mid-July, cutting off the kingdom's path. Egypt would lose the Suez Canal fees that make up its single largest source of foreign currency. This after Houthi attacks already drove canal revenue down more than 60 percent in 2024, a loss of roughly $7 billion.

Iran has already demonstrated this playbook in the Strait of Hormuz. By attacking commercial shipping and declaring the waterway closed, Iran has upended the global energy market, with the price of oil still sitting at over $86 a barrel, compared to around $72 before the war. Before the war, roughly 20 percent of the world's liquefied natural gas and petroleum exports traveled through the Strait of Hormuz daily. Iran's campaign has since choked that flow to a fraction of its normal level, forcing tankers to divert around southern Africa, driving up shipping and insurance costs, and leaving importers in Asia and Europe scrambling for alternative supply.

Force Deployment Challenges

Defending the Bab el-Mandeb Strait would further challenge U.S. Central Command as it continues to blockade Iran and pressure it to reopen Hormuz. The United States has deployed roughly 50,000 troops, two aircraft carriers, 13 destroyers, and about 260 combat aircraft to counter Iran and reopen the Strait of Hormuz, not to fight a multifront war with Iran's other proxies. A Houthi blockade of Bab el-Mandeb would require the United States to either split an already strained force between two fronts or surge additional assets to the region.

The United States did not launch a large offensive air campaign against the Houthis until March 2025, more than 16 months after the group's shutdown of Red Sea shipping began, relying until then on the smaller defensive Operation Prosperity Guardian and limited strikes under Operation Poseidon Archer. By the time the United States launched that offensive, Operation Rough Rider, it took a 52-day air campaign built around two full carrier strike groups, at a cost of more than $1 billion, just to secure a Houthi pledge to stop targeting U.S. and American-flagged vessels, an agreement that did not restrict Houthi targeting against Israel. Facing a renewed Houthi threat now, on top of the Iran mission, would likely demand a comparable force posture absent preemptive action to disrupt the group's ability to threaten the strait before a blockade takes hold.

Preventing Another Blocked Chokepoint

In response to the Houthis' attacks against Saudi Arabia and Red Sea shipping, President Trump warned on July 23 that "if they do this again, the U.S. will hold Iran responsible, in that the Houthis are a Surrogate and/or Proxy of Iran, and major military punishment will be inflicted upon Iran and, of course, the Houthis, themselves."

Israel's campaign against the Houthis points to a direct way to raise the cost of the group's aggression, removing the people who direct it. During operations that ran from May to October 2025, Israeli strikes killed more than a dozen senior Houthi officials, including an August 28 round of strikes on a meeting of the group's leadership that killed the chief of staff, prime minister, and other ministers. Israel's December 2025 recognition of Somaliland, whose coastline sits roughly 300 to 500 kilometers from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, has opened talks over a base that Israeli officials have scouted for intelligence collection and strike operations against the group.

To prevent both the Houthis and Iran from weaponizing the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the United States should leverage the lessons learned from and capabilities provided by Israel and other regional partners to enforce President Trump's red line by:

- Striking Houthi targets along Yemen's coastal area, including the launchers and intelligence capabilities necessary for enforcing its blockade of Saudi Arabia.
- Targeting other vital inland Houthi targets throughout Yemen, including the group's command and control centers, weapons production sites, and military equipment storage facilities.
- Launching precise strikes on key Houthi leaders who enable the group to launch attacks on commercial shipping and America's regional allies.
- Leveraging U.S. aircraft deployed in Israel, including its fighters and refuelers, to sustain operations against the Houthis, while keeping U.S. ships and fighter jets postured near the Persian Gulf to maintain the maritime blockade on Iranian ports and strike Iranian targets.
- Incorporating Israel into the planning and execution of operations against the Houthis, drawing on its intelligence, strike experience, and potential Somaliland access to help track and target Houthi leaders and assets.
- Organizing a coalition of U.S. regional partners, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen's internationally recognized government, to enforce an air, land, and sea blockade of Houthi-controlled Yemen that prevents any non-humanitarian shipments, in particular weapons or dual-use materials, from leaving Iran or entering Yemeni territory.
    - This should include a role for U.S. Eastern Mediterranean partners, who have both an interest in ensuring free transit from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean and the demonstrated capabilities to help defend those interests. As JINSA has documented, Greece's investment in substantially expanding its layered air and missile defenses through the Achilles' Shield program, which will include Israeli systems, makes it a model partner that can extend air defense protection to other partners well beyond its own borders.