

**IRAN'S PROXY IN YEMEN:  
THE HOUTH THREAT TO MIDDLE  
EAST STABILITY, GLOBAL SHIPPING,  
AND U.S. SERVICE MEMBERS**

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**HEARING**

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH  
AFRICA, AND CENTRAL ASIA

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**IRAN'S PROXY IN YEMEN: THE HOUTHI  
THREAT TO MIDDLE EAST STABILITY,  
GLOBAL SHIPPING, AND U.S. SERVICE  
MEMBERS**

**Wednesday, February 14, 2024**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH  
AFRICA AND CENTRAL ASIA,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:03 p.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Joe Wilson (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. WILSON. Ladies and gentlemen, and guests, we're so grateful to have so many of you here, all of you here. The Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia will come to order.

The purpose of this hearing is to address the Iran-backed Houthis threat to Yemen, the Middle East, and the United States national security interest, including through their many significant attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since October 2023.

We will discuss the threat posed by the Houthis and the Biden Administration's response to the dramatic uptick in Iran's malign activity across the region.

I now ask consent unanimously, the gentleman from North Carolina, Dr. Murphy, be allowed to sit on the dais and participate following all members in today's hearing. Without objection, so ordered.

I also ask consent that the statement for the record by Behnam Ben Taleblu and related report be entered into the record. Without objection, so ordered.

I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

And, ladies and gentlemen, I am Joe Wilson, chairman of the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia Subcommittee of the Foreign Affairs Committee and a grateful Member of Congress from South Carolina.

Since the fall of Sana'a when Houthi terrorists violently overthrew the internationally recognized government of Yemen, the Hamas puppet Houthis, along with the Iranian other puppets, have made territory gains and have expanded their capacity to carry out mass murder directed by the regime in Tehran.

The Iranian regime terrorist puppets in Yemen, the Houthis, have launched over 30 attacks on commercial and naval vessels in the Red Sea since November. Their capacity to field such attacks

is a commentary on the Iranian regime's direct support for its network of terrorist puppets and their growth in the region.

The Houthis and other puppet terrorist groups funded, trained, and supplied by the regime in Tehran are operating with sophisticated weapons, including precision-guided missiles and long range drones.

The Houthis have conducted hundreds of attacks on our valued allies and partners in the region and have directly targeted U.S. targets, disrupting world shipping, fueling inflation for household products worldwide, and interrupting the delivery of grain around the world to countries that are need.

They receive material and political support from the world's foremost State sponsor of terrorism and have coordinated with at least two foreign terrorist organizations, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah, but were foolishly delisted as a foreign terrorist organization by the Biden Administration in February 2021 only to be redesignated as a specially designated global terrorist. Sadly, this is severely inadequate and does nothing to hold the regime in Tehran accountable for the direct support for the Houthi terrorist puppets.

The Houthis have paraded identical copies of Iranian ballistic missiles, land attack cruise missiles, and anti-ship cruise missiles and suicide drones. We have seen some of these projectiles launched after October 7 toward or ally in the region, Israel, and formerly they had attacked Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

And more recently, at least 30 plus instances toward international commercial shipping in the Red Sea, spiking insurance premiums and costs for goods on vessels moving across a body of water where between 10 to 15 percent of global trade passes daily.

The Houthis' ability to disrupt shipping gives the regime in Tehran a significant boost in legitimacy and is a key to their goal of death to American, death to Israel.

Proxies of their regime in Tehran have benefited from Biden's hands-off policies and have conveniently attached themselves to the claims of the Palestinians. This is about fealty to Iranian regime and its agenda.

The Biden Administration, in diplomatic pursuit of a disastrous nuclear deal has completely ignored the mass proliferation and development of missiles in terrorism by the regime, arming its proxies and dictator allies. The Iranian regime's missile program is the cornerstone of its nuclear program.

President Trump was correct in canceling the deal, which did nothing to address intercontinental ballistic program or proliferation of terrorism as he successfully built deterrence to protect Israel and America with indeed the Abraham Accords.

This Administration sadly has completely failed to respond to and deter future attacks, striking an ammunition depot in Yemen after providing advance warning is not a sufficient deterrence.

There is sincere and bipartisan outrage over the conditions of extreme poverty in Yemen. Houthi terrorists have engaged in massive aid diversion to immerse themselves in their loyalists while the people of Yemen continue suffering the consequences of the Iran-backed civil war.

The people of Yemen deserve better than constant civil war due to Iranian regime-backed terrorism.

We also understand the interconnection of the dictators with rule of gun invading democracies with rule of law. We see this sadly as we respect the courageous people of Ukraine, the courageous people of Israel who are resisting the access of evil, war criminal Putin, the regime in Tehran and its puppets and the Chinese Communist Party.

This Administration must reverse course and restore credible deterrence to avoid further attacks and destabilization. And I believe, if they did, it would be bipartisan.

I want to again thank you for the witnesses being here today and your expertise. And I look forward to hearing now from the ranking member, Gerry Connolly, also known as past president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Mr. President?

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. Since November 19, the Houthis and Iranian-backed militia organization in Yemen have attacked over 40 commercial ships and multiple U.S. Naval vessels in the Red Sea with no signs of stopping.

They have attacked commercial vessels indiscriminately, wreaking havoc on international shipping and the global economy. Just in the last 3 months, Houthi threats to ships, crews and goods crossing the Red Sea have forced major shipping companies to spend millions of dollars, more fuel, and add an additional 10 days of traveling around the Horn of Africa that so far has cost \$200 billion.

The costly delay will ultimately be felt most significantly by many in the developing world who have already seen rising prices due to inflation caused by Putin's War in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other disruptions in the global supply chain.

It is important that this subcommittee articulate that there is absolute clarity on a bipartisan basis when it comes to Houthi targeting of American service members or core American interests.

Arbitrary Houthi attacks on commercial shipping have already disrupted a key pillar of the international order that has an impact on all nations, freedom of navigation.

At its core, freedom of navigation entitles all countries' vessels to transit around the world in peace, free from interference. The protection and promotion of this longstanding international principal warrants an international response, not to mention how Houthi attacks impact the global economy.

The Biden Administration has crafted a response that defends U.S. interest and deters further aggression while preventing regional escalation, which I believe we must be very mindful of, a strategy that some of my friends on the other side of the aisle, including your, Mr. Chairman, have criticized.

A successful strategy is one that utilizes all the tools in our toolbox, diplomatic, economic and if needed, and only as a last resort, military action.

Some of my colleagues would like to see an Administration that acts unilaterally to impose great costs on Iran and its proxies, committing American blood and treasure to another analyst's war in the Middle East, all while neglecting the devastating humanitarian situation in Yemen.

Let's be clear. Calls for direct strikes on Iran are dangerous and undermine the Administration's efforts to prevent and expand the conflict. A restart to civil war in Yemen will not achieve American objectives. And the Biden Administration rightly sought to prevent wide-scale famine for Yemen civilians while degrading Houthi military capabilities and defending U.S. servicemen and facilities in the region.

Such a strategy is critical for the millions of Yemenis who remain dependent on outside humanitarian aid for even the most basic of necessities.

According to the United Nations, 18.2 million people in Yemen, more than half of its populations depend on such humanitarian assistance, 4.5 million Yemenis are considered internally displaced, and 17.6 million are food insecure.

Years of bombing, ground combat, destruction, and impoverishment from the brutal war that had preceded this set of events forced millions of Yemeni civilians to suffer persistent food scarcity resulting in near famine conditions and widespread malnutrition, especially among children, recurring disease, medical goods shortages and extreme economic hardship. A rupture of the tenuous cease-fire brokered in Yemen would mean another hot conflict in a region that can ill afford it.

Since before the Houthis started attacking commercial shipping in November, the Biden Administration clearly stated it is not interested in a broader conflict in the region.

The Administration has made clear that the United States will not hesitate, however, to protect our personnel, both through action at the U.N. and direct military strikes. And it has followed through on that commitment.

The United States supported a Security Council resolution condemning the Houthi attacks and urging against regional escalation in the days leading up to the military action, making the case to the international community on the knee to hold the Houthis accountable for their action.

The Administration also imposed additional powerful sanctions on the Houthis by designating the group as a specially designated global terrorist group.

This powerful measure sanctions the facilitation and support networks coordinated by Iran, which helped keep the Houthi militants armed and equipped.

The Biden Administration also administered over 55 separate Iran sanction rollouts targeting more than 550 individuals and entities. And just this week, the DOJ announced the indictments of IRGC leadership in Iran and others for terrorist sanction of Asia, fraud and money laundering offenses in connection with the trafficking and selling of Iranian oil sanctioned as well as the seizure of more than 500,000 barrels sanctioned oil.

By all accounts, the Administration's pressure on Iran is working. Just last week, the rial hit an all-time low and the 12 month inflation rate is now at 46.7 percent, a record high in Iran since the U.S. imposed meaningful sanctions in 1996.

Militarily, the United States has moved in concert with partners and allies to expand interdiction operations to prevent illegal Iranian weapons from reaching the Houthis in Yemen and has estab-



lished a 22 nation security operation to protect maritime vessels from Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

It is not just an issue that impacts the United States, but the entire international community. With the leadership of our country and the Biden Administration, we have put together a broad coalition of partners to defend, share an interest in the region to secure the freedom of navigation and open sea lanes of communication.

I look forward to hearing from our distinguished panel and will very much appreciate a lively conversation. Thank you, and I yield back.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much Congressman Connolly. As an indication of how important this hearing is, we are very grateful to welcome the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. And we now recognize Chairman Mike McCaul from Texas for his opening statement.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member Connolly. Since Hamas' brutal October 7 attack on Israel, Iran's proxies throughout the Middle East have launched assault after assault on the United States and our partners.

The Houthis in Yemen have launched dozens of attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

These ongoing Iran-backed attacks threaten a wide array of international interest. They are driving up shipping costs, increasing insurance rates, and disrupting global supply chains.

The Houthis' latest escalation is a symptom of the international community's failure to address the Houthi threat. For years the Houthis have benefited from support provided by Iran and Hezbollah, which transformed this group of rag-tag gorillas into a fighting force with the capacity to destabilize the entire region and disrupt global trade.

But the world has consistently downplayed this threat and Iran's role in enabling it. The Biden Administration's policies have emboldened the Houthis at the expense of our regional partners. And by projecting weakness on the world stage, this Administration has invited aggression.

While Iran was smuggling weapons to the Houthis, this Administration was busy lifting terror designations and cutting off support to Saudi Arabia and amid Houthi cross-border fire.

Appeasement has no place in U.S. foreign policy, but that is exactly what has occurred in Yemen and beyond. Even now this Administration continues to treat the Houthis with kid gloves. They are promoting a U.N. peace deal that would legitimize the Houthis' violent autocratic rule over millions of innocent Yemenis and secure Iran's foothold in Yemen.

And despite redesignating the Houthis as a specially designated global terrorist organization, President Biden has refused to use the strongest tool at his disposal, and that is the foreign terrorist organization designation that they had prior to this Administration.

I think it's time to recognize them for who they are and redesignate them as a foreign terrorist organization. There can be no denying that the Houthis are terrorists and present a real threat.

As attacks by the Houthis continue, urgent action is clearly needed to deter them and defend U.S. national interest.

I look forward to this hearing and hearing how we can work with our allies and partners to protect our service members and the global economy as well as steps to promote stability in the region for nobody wants war. Nobody wants an escalation. Nobody wants war with Iran. But history teaches us that if we do not act in strength but rather weakness, we will invite aggression, conflict, and war.

It is as old as Neville Chamberlain and Hitler. Churchill talked about appeasement. Reagan talked about peace through strength. If we do not project strength, we will get conflict and war. One hundred sixty attacks on our soldiers in Iraq and Syria and then Tower 22 in Jordan with little response. It only begets more violence.

Deterrence is necessary to promote peace in the region. And Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for holding this very important hearing and with that, I yield back.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Chairman Mike McCaul. And we are pleased to have distinguished witnesses with us today.

Ms. Simone A. Ledeen, the Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East. We are grateful to have also Dr. Kenneth M. Pollack, a former CIA analyst and NSC Security Counsel Director for the Persian Gulf. Finally, we have Dr. Jon Alterman, Senior Vice President/Director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

We want to thank you all for being here today. Your full statements will be made part of the record. And I will ask each of you to keep your spoken remarks to 5 minutes in order to allow time for member questions. I now recognize Secretary Ledeen for her opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF SIMONE LEDEEN, FORMER DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST**

Ms. LEDEEN. Chairman McCaul, Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Connolly, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Simone Ledeen, and I previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East.

The Middle East is at a pivotal moment. The region is currently embroiled in a high-stakes, multidimensional conflict fueled by Iran's calculated aggression against the United States, Israel, and other.

The evidence is clear. The Iranian regime is sowing this discord, which threatens international peace and stability. From the shadows, the regime is advancing its agenda by planning and funding attacks by its proxies.

My focus today will be on one of these Iranian-backed proxies, the Houthis in Yemen, and how the U.S. should respond to accelerating Iranian aggression,

The Biden Administration's timid approach toward Iran has placed U.S. service members and crucial global trade routes at grave risk. The Administration's policy of appeasement toward the Iranian regime has proven to be a dangerous fantasy, setting the post-Abraham Accords Middle East on fire. Urgent action is required to change course and re-establish deterrence.

The Iranian-backed Houthis have escalated their attacks on commercial shipping and U.S. Naval war ships in the Red Sea since November 2023. The Houthis have used drones, missiles, and small boats to target both commercial and naval vessels across the Southern Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Sea.

Companies have had to reroute ships around Africa, increasing shipping costs and travel times. Normally an estimated 12 percent of the international trade, amounting to over \$1 trillion in goods annually, navigates through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal annually.

Since the Houthi attacks began, freight rates from East Asia to Europe have surged over 200 percent. Since October 2023, the Houthis have used an alarming array of increasingly sophisticated weapons, including cruise missiles and land attack cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, unmanned surface vessels, essentially remote controlled bomb boats, and anti-ship ballistic missiles, or ASBMs, making the Houthis the first in the world to deploy ballistic missiles against ships, signaling a sophisticated leap in their military capabilities, which now align with those of only a very few nations.

At the same time, Iran and its allies have been exploiting maritime navigation systems to conduct operations with relative impunity in the Red Sea, often disguising their activities under the flags of China, Iran, or Russia. The Dark Fleet, as these ships have been called, enjoys a particular immunity from Houthi attacks, navigating with relative impunity, a fact which points to a level of coordination, which should concern us all.

The Houthis post a multifaceted threat to Yemen, the broader Middle East and U.S. service members. The Houthi movement begun as a Shiite insurgency against Yemen Sunni government has, with Iranian support, become a key military player in the Middle East, devastating Yemen, creating a vast humanitarian crisis, and complicating U.S. and allied strategic interests in a broader Middle East proxy conflict. Additionally, the Iranian-backed Houthi chaos in Yemen has given Al Qaeda and the Arabian Peninsula a favorable environment for training and attack planning.

This is the same terrorist organization responsible for the USS Cole bombing and the Charlie Hebdo attack. The Houthi movement, central to Iran's strategy to increase its influence and disrupt the Middle East status quo has escalated Gulf Region tensions through missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia, endangering global oil supplies.

Additionally, by targeting Red Sea routes, they significantly threaten Israel's supply chain, underscoring their role in Iran's broader ambitions to reshape regional geopolitical dynamics.

The Houthis also threaten U.S. service members stationed in the region. The group's access to drones, missiles, and naval mines enables them to target U.S. forces, which they are currently doing in attacks in U.S. Navy and Merchant Marine vessels.

In the face of this threat, the United States must re-evaluate its regional strategy. The contrast between the optimism fostered by the Abraham Accords in 2020 and the current reality could not be more stark.

The disillusionment with the Biden Administration's regional policy is palpable among our partners and allies. The Biden Administration's early diplomatic efforts in the region, including pressuring Saudi Arabia to cease hostilities against the Houthis, delisting the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization in February 2021, and attempting to revive the joint comprehensive plan of action with Iran has instead only emboldened them.

According to the Foundation for Defense of Democracy, since the start of the Biden Administration, Iran has successfully exported oil worth more than \$100 billion. This dramatic increase in oil revenue explains how Iran is funding its terrorist proxies externally and domestic oppression internally.

To effectively counter Iran and its proxies, the United States must take several steps. First, we must rigorously enforce sanctions, targeting Iran's vital economic sectors, such as oil exports and banking, which could significantly cut its available funds for proxy terrorism.

Second, the U.S. must establish deterrence and protect freedom of navigation by decisively targeting the Houthis and their IRGC sponsors, moving beyond the current ineffective defense-only strategy.

By disrupting their operational networks and reducing Houthi territorial control in Yemen, along with deploying additional U.S. military assets for rapid regional response, the U.S. will be in a much stronger position to restore global commerce routes through the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab.

Third, the U.S. must enhance cooperation with regional allies to secure necessary access basing and overflight rates. This entails deepening strategic partnerships and expanding intelligent sharing mechanisms to effectively counteract Iranian influence.

Fourth, the U.S. should reinvigorate the Saudi-led coalition's efforts to neutralize the Houthi threat in Yemen by providing comprehensive military support, including advanced weaponry, intelligence assistance, logistical support, and training to Saudi forces. This should also include working with the Northern Tribes.

Fifth, the U.S. must provide unwavering support to Israel, both to safeguard its security but also to demonstrate our reliability as a partner and ally.

Finally, the U.S. needs to support the protest movement within Iran. We could be issuing official statements recognizing the legitimacy of the protester's grievances and offer tangible support, such as facilitating secure communications channels for activities.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Ledeen follows:]

**HEARING BEFORE  
THE UNITED STATES HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND CENTRAL ASIA**

February 14, 2024

Testimony of Simone A. Ledeen  
Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East

**I. Introduction**

Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Connolly, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am grateful for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Simone Ledeen, and I am a Senior Fellow at the Strauss Center for International Security and Law in Austin, Texas. I am also the Managing Director at Vantage ROI. Prior to these roles, I served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, and as the Principal Director and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism. From 2014-2016, I served as Executive Director of Standard Chartered Bank's U.S. Law Compliance Program for the Middle East, Africa, and Pakistan, and prior to that at the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Intelligence and Analysis.

The Middle East is at a pivotal moment. The region is currently embroiled in a high-stakes, multidimensional conflict fueled by Iran's calculated aggression against the United States, Israel, and our other partners and allies. The evidence is clear: the Iranian regime is sowing this discord, threatening international peace and stability. From the shadows, the regime is advancing its agenda by planning and funding attacks by its proxies which Iran also trains and equips. My focus today will be on one of these proxies, the Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah, and how the United States must respond with decisive strength to this accelerating Iranian aggression in the Middle East.

The United States' timid approach towards the Iranian regime has directly encouraged Tehran's aggression. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its affiliates have relentlessly escalated their attacks against the U.S., jeopardizing our interests and those of our partners and allies. The Biden Administration's hesitancy has placed U.S. servicemembers and crucial global trade routes at grave risk. The Administration's policy of appeasement toward the Iranian regime has proven to be a dangerous fantasy, setting the post Abraham Accords Middle East on fire. Urgent action is required. The United States must decisively undermine the Iranian Regime's ability to support its proxies, both militarily and financially. We must work closely with our partners and allies to impose significant costs on Tehran and its so-called "axis of resistance," and we must vocally back the Iranian protest movement, signaling unwavering support for the freedom and human rights of the long-oppressed Iranian people.

## II. Houthi's Attacks on Global Shipping in the Red Sea Since October 2023

Since mid-November 2023, the Iranian-backed Houthi rebel group has sharply increased its attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea. These aggressive actions have severely disrupted key shipping routes, damaging the global economy. The Houthis have used drones, missiles, and small boats to target both commercial and naval vessels, threatening a critical waterway for international trade.<sup>1</sup> Their attacks span the Southern Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Sea.<sup>2</sup> The United States and its allies have responded by shooting down drones and missiles launched by the Houthis.<sup>3</sup> Companies have had to reroute ships to avoid the area, leading to a surge in shipping costs and longer travel times given that they must now travel around the African coast.<sup>4</sup> An estimated 12 percent of international trade, amounting to over \$1 trillion in goods annually, including a substantial portion of the world's container traffic, normally navigates through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.<sup>5</sup> Freight rates for routes from East Asia to Europe have experienced a surge of more than 200 percent in the wake of the Houthi offensive.<sup>6</sup>

Between October 2023 and early-February 2024, the Houthis launched an alarming array of weaponry against maritime targets in the Red Sea, including:

- Cruise missiles and land attack cruise missiles, indicating a strategic capability to target both maritime and land-based assets simultaneously.<sup>7</sup>
- A staggering number of suicide unmanned aerial vehicles, showcasing an ability to employ drone technology for both surveillance and direct attacks.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Timeline: Houthi Attacks and U.S. Responses*, United States Institute of Peace (Feb. 6, 2024), <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2024/feb/01/timeline-houthi-attacks-and-us-responses>.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Simon Scarr, Adolfo Arranz, Jonathan Saul, Han Huang and Jitesh Chowdhury, *Red Sea attacks*, Reuters (Feb. 2, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/ISRAEL-PALESTINIANS/SHIPPING-ARMS/igvdmngevvo/>; Avi Scharf, *The Full Map: All Ships Attacked by Yemen's Houthis in the Red Sea*, Haaretz (Jan. 15, 2024), <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2024-01-15/ty-article-magazine/30-attacks-all-red-sea-ships-targeted-by-the-houthis/0000018e-5df7-d6p2-afbc-5df7a430000>.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g., *Joint Statement from Australia, Bahrain, Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States on Additional Strikes Against the Houthis in Yemen*, U.S. Department of Defense (Feb. 3, 2024), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3665864/joint-statement-from-australia-bahrain-denmark-canada-the-netherlands-new-zealand/>.

<sup>4</sup> Lori Ann LaRocco, *Red Sea crisis boosts shipping costs, delays – and inflation worries*, CNBC (Jan. 3, 2024), <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/01/03/red-sea-crisis-shipping-costs-delays-inflation.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Perkins, *FACTBOX: Seaborne trade reroutes away from Red Sea over Houthi attacks*, S&P Global Commodity Insights (Dec. 21, 2023), <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/shipping/122123-factbox-seaborne-trade-reroutes-away-from-red-sea-over-houthi-attacks>.

<sup>6</sup> *Red Sea crisis impact on box rates more rapid than Covid-19: Xeneta analysis*, Container News (Feb. 1, 2024), <https://container-news.com/red-sea-crisis-impact-on-box-rates-more-rapid-than-covid-19-xeneta-analysis/#:~:text=Xeneta%2C%20an%20ocean%20freight%20rate,52%20days%20to%20the%20pandemic>.

<sup>7</sup> *Timeline: Houthi Attacks and U.S. Responses*, United States Institute of Peace (Feb. 6, 2024), <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2024/feb/01/timeline-houthi-attacks-and-us-responses>.

<sup>8</sup> Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, *Inside the Houthis' Stockpile of Iranian Weapons*, Foreign Policy Magazine (Feb. 8, 2024), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/08/yemen-houthi-iran-weapons-intelligence-report/>.

- Unmanned surface vessels, highlighting the use of innovative maritime warfare technology.<sup>9</sup>
- Anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), making the Houthis the first in the world to deploy ballistic missiles against ships.<sup>10</sup>

The Houthis' adoption of ASBMs marks a significant and alarming evolution in regional maritime warfare, signaling a sophisticated leap in their military capabilities, which now align with those of only a few nations. ASBMs, with their low-flying, cruise-based technologies designed for stealth and evasion, have historically been a part of only a few nations' arsenals.<sup>11</sup> Their use by the Houthis not only highlights the advanced nature of their threat to maritime security, but also illustrates the strategic depth of Iran's influence, extending its power projection far beyond its borders. By arming the Houthis with these missiles amidst a devastating civil war and humanitarian crisis, Iran has strategically enhanced its area denial capabilities, threatening vital global shipping lanes in the Southern Red Sea and the Arabian Sea. This move aims to deter the United States from intervening in regional conflicts and positions Iran as a formidable disruptor of international maritime commerce. Despite the relatively high number of attacks, the recorded hits on maritime targets have been relatively limited, highlighting the Houthis' difficulty in achieving precise hits with these more sophisticated weapons.

In concert with the relentless Houthi attacks against global shipping, Iran and its allies have been exploiting maritime navigation systems to conduct operations with relative impunity in the Red Sea, often disguising their activities under the flags of China, Iran, or Russia. The "dark fleet," enjoys a peculiar immunity from Houthi attacks, underscoring a coordinated effort that aligns with Iran's strategic interests. This fleet, comprising vessels that often turn off their transponders to obscure their locations and identities, primarily facilitate the transport of oil from sanction-hit countries like Venezuela and Iran.<sup>12</sup> The deliberate avoidance of these ships by Houthi forces, despite their aggressive campaign against global shipping, highlights a tacit understanding or arrangement that ensures their safety. This scenario exposes a sophisticated method to circumvent international sanctions and raises concerns about the selective enforcement of maritime security, where the "dark fleet" navigates with relative impunity.

### III. Threat to Yemen, the Middle East, and U.S. Servicemembers

The Houthi movement, which has evolved into a significant threat to Yemen, the broader Middle East, and U.S. servicemembers in the region, originated from a Zaidi Shiite insurgency

<sup>9</sup> See e.g., Doug G. Ware, *Houthis now using exploding drone boats to target ships, Navy commander says*, Stars and Stripes (Jan. 4, 2024), <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle-east/2024-01-04/middle-east-houthis-red-sea-boat-drones-12556543.html>.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g., Oded Yaron, *Houthis Threaten Red Sea Shipping With Groundbreaking Iranian Missile*, Haaretz (Dec. 12, 2023), <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2023-12-12/tv-article-magazine/houthis-threaten-red-sea-shipping-with-groundbreaking-iranian-missile/0000018c-5aa4-df2f-adac-feadd7220000>.

<sup>11</sup> Sebastien Roblin, *We Might Have Just Seen the World's First Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile Attack*, Popular Mechanics (Dec. 1, 2023), <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a45964460/first-anti-ship-ballistic-missile-attack-houthi-rebels/>.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Triebert, Blacki Migliozi, Alexander Cardia, Muyi Xiao and David Botti, *Fake Signals and American Insurance: How a Dark Fleet Moves Russian Oil*, The New York Times (May 30, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/05/30/world/asia/russia-oil-ships-sanctions.html>.

challenging the Sunni Yemeni government. Over the years, and thanks in large part to its Iranian sponsorship, this group has transitioned into a formidable military force at the heart of the Yemeni Civil War that erupted in 2015. The conflict, driven by the Houthis' actions, has completely destabilized Yemen, caused a massive humanitarian crisis, and significantly complicated the strategic landscape for the United States and its allies in the Middle East. The civil war in Yemen has not only devastated the country and its people, but it has also become a proxy battleground for larger regional conflicts.

The chaos caused by the Houthis has also provided Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) with opportunities to fortify their operations. AQAP has been responsible for numerous high-profile terrorist attacks and attempts over the years including the Charlie Hebdo Attack in 2015 and the USS Cole bombing in 2000.<sup>13</sup> Yemen now offers AQAP a favorable environment for training and attack-planning. Just recently, AQAP released a 9-minute video advocating for lone jihad in the West.<sup>14</sup> The video features English narration and is presented by Khubayb al-Sudani, a figure with a \$4 million U.S. bounty on his head. The video glorifies past jihadist attacks on U.S. soil, signaling AQAP's ongoing threat to global security.

It is worth mentioning as well that the relationship between the Houthi state sponsor, Iran, and AQAP has evolved. While the support Iran has provided Shia groups is well-documented, they have also aided AQAP.<sup>15</sup> The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have provided a safe haven for jihadist leaders. In the 1990s, an agreement was made between Osama bin Laden's team and the Iranian regime to allow for Al Qaeda members to travel through Iran and into Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> This provided a key passageway for Al Qaeda to move money and their fighters.<sup>17</sup> Iran has also gone above and beyond to host specific Al Qaeda leaders. For example, Iran has harbored Sayf al-'Adl, who some consider Al-Qaeda's "de facto" leader, within their borders.<sup>18</sup>

#### a. Threat to Yemen

In Yemen, the Houthis have seized control of significant portions of the country, including the capital, Sana'a. Their so-called "governance" has led to widespread humanitarian crises, including famine, disease outbreaks, and massive displacement of civilians. The conflict has decimated the country's infrastructure, economy, and healthcare system, leaving millions of Yemenis in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Just this month, a Houthi-controlled court

<sup>13</sup> *What Is AQAP, the Terror Group Claiming Charlie Hebdo Attack?*, ABC News (Jan. 14, 2015), <https://abcnews.go.com/International/aqap-terror-group-claiming-charlie-hebdo-attack/story?id=28223532>; *U.S. says suspected USS Cole bombing planner killed in Yemen strike*, Reuters (Jan. 6, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN1P1074/>.

<sup>14</sup> *U.S. Report: Iran's Support for Terrorism*, United States Institute for Peace (Mar. 30, 2023), <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/mar/30/us-report-iran-s-support-terrorism#:~:text=Iranian%20forces%20have%20directly%20backed,regime%207s%20brutal%20crackdown%20in%20Syria>.

<sup>16</sup> Maseh Zani, *Al Qaeda's Safe Haven in Iran*, Critical Threats (July 29, 2011), <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaeda-safe-haven-in-iran>.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, *Al-Qaeda's "De Facto" Leader is Protected by Iran*, The George Washington University (Feb. 16, 2023), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/al-qaeda-de-facto-leader-sayf-al-adl>.



ordered the execution of 13 people for “homosexual acts.”<sup>19</sup> The Houthi control over Yemen’s institutions has also created a power vacuum that has allowed terrorist organizations, such as AQAP, to maintain a foothold in the region.

#### **b. Threat to the Middle East**

The Houthi movement extends its impact far beyond Yemen’s borders, serving as a pivotal component in Iran’s broader strategy to amplify its sway and disrupt the established order throughout the Middle East. Notably, their aggressive campaigns against Saudi Arabia, characterized by missile and drone attacks on vital infrastructure and oil installations, have escalated tensions within the Gulf region, thereby endangering global oil supplies. Moreover, with a quarter of Israel’s trade occurring with Asian countries, the Houthis deliberately target the Red Sea routes, posing a significant threat to Israel’s entire supply chain. This strategic targeting reflects the Houthis’ role in Iran’s ambitions – both as a local force in Yemen and to reshape geopolitical dynamics across the Middle East.

#### **c. Threat to United States Forces**

The Houthi insurgency also poses a direct threat to U.S. servicemembers stationed in the region. The group’s access to advanced weaponry, including drones, missiles, and naval mines supplied by Iran, enables them to target U.S. military assets and personnel. The Houthis have demonstrated their willingness and capability to engage in attacks against U.S. Navy ships and to target bases in the region where U.S. forces are stationed.<sup>20</sup> These actions endanger the lives of U.S. servicemembers and complicate diplomatic efforts to stabilize the region and counter Iranian influence.

The recent drone attack in Jordan, resulting in the tragic loss of three American soldiers, highlights the threats posed by Iranian-backed proxies in the Middle East.<sup>21</sup>

### **IV. The Biden Administration’s Response and Potential for Increased Escalation**

The contrast between the optimism fostered by the Abraham Accords in 2020 and the current reality could not be starker. The disappointment in the Biden Administration’s regional policy is palpable among our partners and allies. The persistent escalation of threats from Iranian-backed proxies, including the Houthis, necessitates a reevaluation of the United States’ strategy.

The Biden Administration’s current strategy of appeasement is not viable. Aggression against U.S. interests and our requirement for global freedom of navigation demand a response that is

<sup>19</sup> *13 Sentenced To Death For Homosexuality In Yemen: Source*, Barron’s (Feb. 6, 2024), <https://www.barrons.com/news/13-sentenced-to-death-for-homosexuality-in-yemen-source-0f0dc729>.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g., *Houthi target U.S. destroyer in latest round of missile attacks; strike British merchant ship*, CBS News (Jan. 27, 2024), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/houthi-target-u-s-destroyer-carney-british-merchant-ship-missile-attacks-red-sea-gulf-of-aden/>.

<sup>21</sup> *Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds a Press Briefing*, U.S. Department of Defense (Feb. 5, 2024), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3667341/pentagon-press-secretary-air-force-maj-gen-pat-ryder-holds-a-press-briefing/>.

both swift and decisive. Demonstrating such resolve is essential to deter further escalation and restore regional balance.

Recent defensive U.S. military actions against the Houthis have not stopped their attacks. The continued rerouting of shipping and the spike in insurance costs are a testament to a flawed U.S. approach. Announcing strikes in advance to avoid enemy casualties signals hesitancy and undermines the protection of the United States' interests. Appeasement has invited escalation.

The Biden Administration's early diplomatic efforts in the region, including pressuring Saudi Arabia to cease hostilities against the Houthis, delisting the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist organization in February 2021, and attempting to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, only emboldened Tehran.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the significant increase in Iranian oil sales in 2023 has financed the regime's aggression and proxy activities across the region.

Further, by facilitating the release of billions of dollars — notably, \$2.76 billion in debts paid by Iraq for Iranian natural gas and an additional waiver that provided Iran access to \$10 billion in electricity revenue — the Biden administration has enabled Tehran to divert more resources toward its military and proxy activities across the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> Under the Biden Administration's policies, even the Iranian Oil Ministry has achieved “stunning successes” according to an Iranian Member of Parliament.<sup>24</sup>

According to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, since the start of the Biden Administration, Iran has successfully exported oil worth more than \$100 billion.<sup>25</sup> The United Against Nuclear Iran Tanker Tracker database found that Iran managed to sell 516 million barrels in 2023 alone.<sup>26</sup> This sales volume marks a 23 percent increase from the prior year and an 82 percent surge compared to May 2019 and January 2021, known as the “maximum pressure” era under the Trump Administration.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Hansler, *Biden administration re-designates Houthis as Specially Designated Global Terrorists*, CNN (Jan. 17, 2024), <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/politics/biden-administration-houthis-global-terrorist-entity/index.html#:~:text=The%20administration%20removed%20the%20Houthis administration%20in%20its%20final%20weeks>.

<sup>23</sup> *Iraq to pay \$2.76 billion in gas and electricity debt to Iran*, Reuters (June 10, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-pay-276-bln-gas-electricity-debt-iran-2023-06-10/>; *Iran Receives Access to \$10 Billion Thanks to U.S. Sanctions Waiver*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, (Nov. 15, 2023), <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/11/15/iran-receives-access-to-10-billion-thanks-to-u-s-sanctions-waiver/>.

<sup>24</sup> @EnergyIran, X (Feb. 10, 2024), <https://twitter.com/EnergyIran>.

<sup>25</sup> Saeed Ghasseminejad, *Bipartisan Coalitions Urge Biden to Resume Enforcement of Iran Oil Sanctions*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies (Feb. 5, 2024), [https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/02/05/bipartisan-coalitions-urge-biden-to-resume-enforcement-of-iran-oil-sanctions/#:~:text=Teheran%20has%20exported%20over%20%24100.516%20million%20barrels%20of%20oil: see also Ali Ahmadi, Is Biden Ignoring Iran's Sanctions Evasion?, Foreign Policy Magazine \(Dec. 5, 2023\), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/05/biden-iran-sanctions-evasion-oil-exports-enforcement/#:~:text=According%20to%20domestic%20reporting%20C%20Iran's evasion%20of%20U.S.%20extraterritorial%20sanctions>.](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/02/05/bipartisan-coalitions-urge-biden-to-resume-enforcement-of-iran-oil-sanctions/#:~:text=Teheran%20has%20exported%20over%20%24100.516%20million%20barrels%20of%20oil: see also Ali Ahmadi, Is Biden Ignoring Iran's Sanctions Evasion?, Foreign Policy Magazine (Dec. 5, 2023), https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/05/biden-iran-sanctions-evasion-oil-exports-enforcement/#:~:text=According%20to%20domestic%20reporting%20C%20Iran's evasion%20of%20U.S.%20extraterritorial%20sanctions)

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

Assuming Iran offers its oil at a discount of 5 to 15 percent below the Brent crude price, the regime's oil transactions in 2023 would have brought in revenue between \$36.3 billion and \$40.6 billion.<sup>28</sup> This revenue represents a staggering 187 percent rise in average monthly earnings when juxtaposed with figures from the "maximum pressure" days, representing a clear signal to our allies and partners that Washington is neither committed to nor serious about countering Iran's support for terrorism and its pursuit of regional hegemony.<sup>29</sup> These numbers illustrating the dramatic increase in oil revenue demonstrates how Iran is funding its domestic oppression and international aggression.<sup>30</sup> In the 2024 Middle East, this is exactly the wrong message to send.

## V. Recommendations

To address the escalating threats posed by Iran and its proxy Houthi rebels, a comprehensive new strategy must be implemented as soon as possible. This strategy should aim to restore balance and security in the region through the following actions:

1. **Enforce Sanctions Rigorously:** Implement and strictly enforce sanctions to cut off Tehran's financial lifelines, hindering its ability to fund nuclear advancements and support regional terrorism. Sanctions must be enforced against critical sectors of Iran's economy, including oil exports, banking, and key industries, to significantly reduce Tehran's revenue streams.
2. **Reestablish Deterrence with Decisive Military Activities:** Reinforce the credible threat of military action by deploying additional military assets in the region. This involves prepositioning naval, air, and ground forces to ensure rapid response capabilities, which would signal to Tehran the seriousness of U.S. commitments to securing the region. Enhancing missile defense systems and cyber defense capabilities in collaboration with regional partners can also reduce vulnerabilities to Iranian aggression. The United States must also consider targeted actions against key network nodes and logistical routes utilized by the IRGC and the Houthis. Striking these critical points will significantly disrupt their operational capabilities and logistics, signaling a strong U.S. commitment to countering regional threats and supporting global stability.
3. **Strengthen Regional Cooperation and Partnerships:** Enhance cooperation with regional allies to secure necessary access, basing, and overflight rights. This entails deepening strategic partnerships with relevant Gulf Cooperation Council countries, enhancing joint military training exercises, and expanding intelligence-sharing mechanisms to effectively counteract Iranian influence.
4. **Support Efforts to Counter the Houthi Threat:** Reinvigorate the Saudi-led coalition's efforts to neutralize the Houthi threat in Yemen by providing comprehensive military support. This support should include advanced weaponry, intelligence assistance,

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<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

logistical support, and training to Saudi forces. This should also include working with the Northern tribes.

5. **Bolster Defense Capabilities of Key Allies:** Provide unwavering support to Israel to safeguard its security, destroy Hamas, and deter Hezbollah from a large-scale attack against the Jewish nation. This includes ensuring Israel's qualitative military edge through the provision of advanced military technology, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing. Supporting efforts to strengthen and resupply Israel's missile defense systems, such as Iron Dome and David's Sling, is vital for protecting civilian areas from rocket attacks.
6. **Support the Iranian People:** Moreover, the United States must support the protest movement within Iran, which has been enduring the regime's oppression for years. This support could manifest in various forms—from official statements recognizing the legitimacy of the protestors' grievances to more tangible support like facilitating secure communication channels for activists and providing platforms for the voices of the Iranian people to be heard internationally.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and I look forward to your questions.

Mr. WILSON. Madam Secretary, to keep within time, and we need to continue to Director Pollack, but I want to thank because I agree with everything you have said. So I'm not disagreeing with you. But your multi-points are very good. I look forward to working with Congressman Connolly to try to see what we can agree. But we now need to proceed to Director Pollack. And, again, we need to stick to the 5-minutes so that we can get to the floor.

**STATEMENT OF KENNETH POLLACK, PhD, FORMER CIA ANALYST AND NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL DIRECTOR FOR THE PERSIAN GULF**

Mr. POLLACK. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, Representative Connolly, distinguished members, it's a great honor to be able to talk to you on this important subject.

In the 5-minutes you've given me, I would like to make five simple points to the subcommittee.

First, I want to start by saying that I have been impressed with the Administration's response to the Houthi attacks so far. It has been larger, more powerful, and more sustained than I had expected. It probably has rocked the Houthis and the Iranians, and it is undoubtedly a major element in the diminution of Houthi attacks we have seen in recent days. However, I am skeptical that it will achieve our ultimate objectives.

Second point, it is certainly the case that the attacks on Red Sea shipping are serving Iranian goals in a variety of different ways. But we need to recognize that they are serving Houthi goals brilliantly, independent of whatever Iran is getting from them.

This military campaign by the Houthis distracts from problems in governance and economic affairs in the Yemeni areas under oppressive Houthi control. It allows them to ingratiate themselves with the wider Arab and Muslim worlds where they were strongly disliked, even hated before October 7. It allows them to play on the world stage as well where their ultimate ambitions lie.

Third, what we are attempting with the Houthis is ultimately a strategy of coercion. And coercion requires threatening something that the other side values more than whatever it is you want them to do or to stop doing.

I am hopeful, but I am skeptical, that merely destroying their anti-shipping capability will constitute such a threat to them. I think that that requires us to consider instead that which the Houthis clearly would value more than what they are getting from their anti-shipping attacks and that is their control of Yemeni territory. That is their first priority.

Moreover, the only times that we have seen the Houthis willing to negotiate and to make compromises, let alone concessions, have been when their control of territory has been threatened as it was in 2018 at Hudaydah and in 2022 at Ma'rib. That, in turn, suggests that the only way to convince the Houthis to cease and desist from these attacks will be to threaten them on the ground.

Now I want to be very, very clear about this. I am not suggesting American boots on the ground in Yemen. That is unnecessary. That would be entirely counterproductive. However, I do believe that it will ultimately require the United States to arm, equip, and train the anti-Houthi coalition that is operating under the umbrella of

the government of Yemen. It could mean deploying American air power as well as we did in support of Iraqi forces against ISIS in 2014 to 2018.

Finally, when this latest civil war broke out in Yemen, and we should recognize Yemen has been in various states of civil war for decades if not centuries. But when this latest round broke out, we staunchly believed that we had no interest in this conflict other than to shut down the fighting as soon as possible to limit civilian casualties.

That was understandable, but it turns out it was also mistaken. The Houthis have proven themselves to be belligerent, aggressive, and convinced that violence is the best way to get what they want. They also share Iran's goals of driving the United States out of the region, destroying Israel, and overturning the governments of American allies. They are forces of oppression inside Yemen and forces of aggression beyond it.

Yemen, the United States, the Middle East, and the entire world would be better off without them in power in Sana'a.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Pollack:]



Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia

On Iran's Proxy in Yemen: The Houthi Threat to Middle East Stability, Global Shipping,  
and U.S. Servicemembers

## **Ending the Houthi Threat to Red Sea Shipping**

**Kenneth M. Pollack, Ph.D.**

Senior Fellow

February 14, 2024

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Testimony of  
**Kenneth M. Pollack**  
Senior Fellow  
American Enterprise Institute

### **Ending the Houthi Threat to Red Sea Shipping**

Before the United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia

February 14, 2024

Mr. Chairman, Representative Connolly, and distinguished Members, I am honored to be able to appear before you to discuss U.S. policy toward Yemen, the Houthis, and the wider Iranian alliance network in the Middle East.

#### **The Strategic Context**

I would like to begin my remarks by placing our immediate problems with the Houthis in the wider strategic context.

I have always been fond of the Confucian saying that “the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.” So let us call some things by their right names. First, Iran is our enemy. Period. Full stop.

Iran is our enemy not because *we* want them to be but because the government of Iran wants *us* to be. This is not a problem of miscommunication or misunderstanding. With the exception of the George W. Bush Administration, every American president since Jimmy Carter has sought reconciliation if not full rapprochement with Iran, and every single one has been rebuffed—sometimes violently. The great Iran specialist Karim Sadjadpour has related that according to former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami, Iran’s Supreme Leader, ‘Ali Khamene’i, once told Khatami that he would never give up Iran’s enmity with the United States because to do so would delegitimize his rule and threaten his grip on power. Sometimes the fault is in our stars, not in ourselves.

Second, Iran is waging war against the United States and has been doing so for years, at least since 1987 when it planted naval mines throughout the Persian Gulf which were designed to—and did—strike American ships plying those waters. Ships that took no hostile action nor posed any danger to Iran. Since 1983, Iran has mounted terrorist attacks against the United States employing a variety of proxies from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia to Iraq. Altogether, those attacks have claimed the lives of over 800 Americans. Moreover, Iran works to subvert the governments of American allies across the Middle East. It employs blackmail and coercion against them, and also sponsors revolutionaries, terrorists, and insurgents against them.

As a particular example, for at least a decade after the Iranian revolution, Israel attempted to forge a tacit, strategic relationship with Iran to continue that which it had under the Shah. The Iranian regime took everything that Israel proffered, and then waged war on them too. Tehran has conducted terrorist attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets around the world, as well as



arming and assisting groups fighting for the destruction of the Jewish state such as Hizballah, Palestinian Jihad, and of course Hamas.

The source of Iran's animus is both ideological and geostrategic. The Iranian regime continues to hew to an interpretation of Shi'a Islam devised by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the first supreme leader of Iran, which calls for an Islamic state of his devising across the Islamic world. In this worldview, non-Muslims, can only be vassals, *dhimmis*, second-class citizens in that Islamic state. Thus, the United States must be removed from the region as a foreign contagion and the Jewish state must be destroyed. Of arguably greater importance in recent decades, the Iranian regime is determined to make itself the hegemon of the Middle East, something many (arguably most) Iranians see as the "natural order" in the region. Here as well, because the United States has been the de facto hegemon since the 1970s, we must be driven out and Israel, a state more powerful than Iran, must be destroyed.

Together, these reinforcing motives have made Iran the principal revisionist power in the Middle East. That is also the primary explanation for Iran's backing of so many violent extremist groups across the region, and its leadership of what it calls its "axis of resistance." Too often, Americans assume that this alliance is animated by Shi'a solidarity. That is a dangerous misconception. Iran is far more ecumenical in its support for murder and mayhem, backing literally any group in the region willing to employ violence to overturn the status quo regardless of race, creed, or color. That is why it is the primary backer of Hamas, a violent Sunni Arab Islamist group whose members mostly do not otherwise care for Shi'a (or Persians, for that matter).

Iran's determination to overturn the status quo in the Middle East has driven its wider strategic activities over the past two decades. Others have noted the resemblance between the current geopolitical dynamics and those of the 1930s, when rival alliances began to coalesce as a precursor to the Second World War. At that time, there was nothing "natural" or inevitable about an alliance among Germany, Italy, and Japan. Italy and Japan had fought against Germany in the First World War. What brought them together was their shared desire to overturn a status quo that each thought did not properly provide them with power, wealth, and glory—as well as a common willingness to use force to overturn that status quo and take what they wanted.

A similar set of dynamics is emerging across the world today. That same determination to overturn the status quo by force is bringing China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran together to a greater and greater extent in recent years. Moreover, Iran in particular, has recognized this trend and very deliberately cultivated it to try to forge an alliance of violent, anti-status quo states to a much greater degree than any of the members of the original Axis did in the 1930s or '40s. Iran recognizes that it will be able to prosecute its war against the United States and its allies far more effectively with the active support, direct or indirect, of such an alliance of revisionist states. That is why it is providing Russia with drones and missiles for its war against Ukraine, and why it is trying so hard to ingratiate itself with China.

Yet the emergence of this revisionist alliance and the manner in which it has assisted and emboldened Tehran has been matched by a reluctance on the part of the United States that has done the same. Both the Obama and Trump Administrations were far more interested in making a deal with Iran than in confronting it. Both pushed back on it on occasion when they felt they had no other choice, but were otherwise more interested in wooing Iran than walloping it. Worse, both administrations loudly proclaimed their contempt for the traditional American role in the Middle East (and for American allies there) and trumpeted their determination to abdicate U.S. hegemony and even eliminate America's presence in the region.

This is merely an extreme form of the U.S. approach to Iran and the Middle East going back decades that has enabled Tehran's aggressive, anti-status quo behavior and brought us to our current state of affairs. Part of the problem has been that American administrations have been loath to acknowledge that Iran is our enemy because the Iranian regime wants to be regardless of what we may want. Part of our problem has been that we have been loath to acknowledge that we are fighting a war against Iran and its allies, even if a low-intensity one, because we have not wanted to expend the energy and resources we believe is required to do so. And still another part of our problems with Iran and its allies has been that, in turn, we have sought to fend off their attacks on us merely by playing defense. However, as any military officer or historian can tell you, it is effectively impossible to end—let alone win—a war by remaining solely on the defensive.

### **The Problem of the Houthis**

Yemen is a place of constant warfare. Yemen's tribes have been fighting one another for centuries. From time to time, the constant beat of tribal warfare is punctuated by political conflicts that then fold in the ongoing tribal violence. The Houthis have been fighting Yemen's central government since 2004. When that regime, then led by the dictator, 'Ali Abdullah Saleh, was rocked by the Arab Spring events of 2011, the Houthis joined their war with that of the wider political violence breaking out across the country. They capitalized on the crumbling of the regime to advance their own agenda, and eventually gain control of the capital and the territory of what had once been "North Yemen."

The Houthis would like to take control of all of Yemen and they are fearful of the internationally-recognized government of Yemen (the Republic of Yemen Government, or ROYG). The ROYG is actually a loose and fractious coalition of groups united almost solely by their opposition to the Houthis. However, they have prevented the Houthis from taking over the entire country, and at times have driven the Houthis out of key terrain when they have had foreign backing. In short, Yemeni territory is both the Houthis' most important possession and their greatest aspiration, and the ROYG is their greatest threat and obstacle.

That said, the Houthis have developed a free-standing interest in attacking shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb. First, it should be noted that while the Houthis had conducted occasional attacks going back several years, it was not until their offensive against the Yemeni city of Ma'rib was stalemated in 2022 that they turned their attention more fully toward the Red Sea. Unable to capture Ma'rib from the ROYG, the Houthis began to import large numbers of radars and antiship weapons from the Iranians, and began to boast about their new ability to interdict global maritime trade.

What's more, military stalemate created political problems for the Houthis. Without victories to demonstrate their prowess, the Houthis only had their governance of northern Yemen to proclaim their glory, and in this area, there was nothing to brag about. Like their Iranian allies and the other members of the Axis of Resistance, the Houthis have failed miserably in terms of delivering to the people under their control. They have been unable to deliver services, pay salaries, or promote civil rights in the areas under their control. The people there are increasingly unhappy with Houthi rule.

Thus, the timing of the Houthi shift to maritime operations does not seem coincidental. It seems most likely that, unable to make further progress on the ground or deliver a decent life to the population they control, the Houthis began to build up their maritime warfare operations to open up a new front in hope that this would once again buoy their military fortunes and

overshadow their ground military, political, and economic failings. Moreover, by picking fights with new enemies, the Houthis have been able to rally some degree of support for themselves, both in Yemen and abroad.

Indeed, it is also important to understand that before their new anti-shipping campaign, the Houthis had few allies or admirers in the Middle East. The Houthis are a fundamentalist element within the Zaydi Shi'a community of Islam. Most of the Muslim world are Sunnis, and most Shi'a are "Twelvers" (*Ithna 'asharis*), not Zaydis or "Fivers." Thus, the Houthis are a minority of a minority of a minority. Moreover, their alignment with Iran did not boost their regional popularity as most Arabs (not to mention Israeli Jews, Turks, and Kurds) hate the Persians, whom they often see as condescending and domineering.

Consequently, embarking on the new strategy of maritime attacks and claiming that it was in support of the Palestinians suddenly transformed Houthi fortunes. They could now claim to be acting as a force for Muslim solidarity in favor of the Palestinians, and against the United States and Israel. By taking up the Palestinian cause, the Houthis were trying to end their pariah status in the Arab and Islamic world. And they quickly did so. Palestinian sympathizers across the Middle East and the world suddenly embraced the Houthis in ways they never had before—for many, because they had never heard of the Houthis, and for those who had because the Houthis were now portrayed as champions of the oppressed Palestinians, not as the fundamentalist Zaydi Iran-allies they actually are.

Moreover, these attacks have put the Houthis on the world map. The Houthis can now claim to be waging a war against the United States. And they have demonstrated that the world must pay attention to them because they have the potential to shut down all shipping in one of the world's critical maritime chokepoints. This has made the Houthis admired in some quarters and feared in others. In particular, it has buoyed their popularity inside Yemen itself, providing much needed relief from growing public unhappiness there.

As you are probably aware, the Houthi "slogan" is "God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! A curse upon the Jews! Victory to Islam." It is worth noting that none of that is about Yemen. It is all about goals that go far beyond the Arabian peninsula and speak to Houthi aspirations to be a major player in the region and the world, all of which are well-served by holding global trade hostage at the Bab el-Mandeb.

That has also benefitted Iran, and was likely one of Tehran's primary motives in providing the weaponry to the Houthis in the first place. Iran wants its allies and proxies to be able to put at risk global chokepoints (like the Strait of Hormuz) and otherwise threaten the interests of other countries around the world in hope of coercing them into doing Iran's bidding. In this way, the Houthis have been a hugely valuable investment for Iran at remarkably little cost.

There is one last issue to note. When the latest Yemeni civil war broke out in 2014, and for the last decade since, the United States has largely taken the position that the worst thing about it was the war itself and the humanitarian toll it was taking. Successive administrations saw the Houthis as unpleasant Iranian allies, but not threats to American interests. Nor did we concern ourselves with what might be best for the people of Yemen—the majority of whom are Sunnis (and other Zaydis) who do not want to live under a fundamentalist Zaydi regime.

The Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have demonstrated that the Yemeni civil war does engage vital American interests, both in terms of the threat to global trade via the Bab el-Mandeb and the wider threat that Iran's violent, revisionist Axis of Resistance poses to American allies across the Middle East. We now must recognize that we do have a stake in the outcome of the

Yemeni civil war beyond the mere humanitarian desire to end the killing. The Houthis cannot be allowed to win because they have demonstrated that they will use their military power beyond Yemen's borders in ways that threaten those vital American interests. They have demonstrated that American interests now lie squarely with those of the majority of Yemenis who do not want Yemen to fall under Houthi control.

#### **Moving Rogue Regimes and their Allies**

This creates the first problem with the current American strategy. Although Iran is aiding, abetting, and encouraging the Houthis to attack shipping in the Red Sea, the Houthis are doing so primarily because it is to their own advantage to do so. Indeed, perhaps the best indication of this is that in recent months, the Houthis have begun to attack ships in the Red Sea that had no connection to Israel whatsoever. This demonstrates that while the Houthi maritime strategy may have begun as a bid to show solidarity with the Palestinian cause, the benefits it has brought to the Houthis have pushed them to continue it for their own interests, which far exceed whatever may happen in Gaza.

In other words, the Houthis are getting a lot from these maritime attacks. Moreover, they are doing so at very low cost to themselves, so far.

While I want to commend the Biden Administration for responding to these unprovoked and outrageous Houthi attacks in a far more forceful manner than I had expected, I am skeptical that our air campaign will have the desired effect. We can all hope that the U.S. operations will strip the Houthis of their ability to continue these attacks, or deter them from mounting further ones. However, that seems unlikely. All that the U.S. is doing so far is striking at the Houthi anti-shipping capability itself which is extremely cheap for the Houthis, both because the weapons they are using are cheap to manufacture and because most of that cost is being borne by the Iranians. It is also worth remembering that the Houthis weathered years of airstrikes by the Saudis and Emiratis without it having any impact on their behavior.

Moreover, the military systems our forces are employing are often far more costly than the Houthi and Iranian systems we are destroying. In addition, we have limited stockpiles while the Houthis and the Iranians just keep making more. It seems likely that we will choose to conserve our remaining arsenal of SM-2s, TLAMs, and other munitions to hedge against other threats long before the Houthis and Iranians are ready to stop building and launching the Shahed-136s, anti-ship ballistic missiles, and anti-ship cruise missiles, that they have been launching in the Red Sea.

Finally, one of the most important lessons of millennia of warfare is that purely defensive strategies do not win wars, nor can they end wars quickly. No matter how successful a defense may be, attackers don't stop attacking just because they aren't making progress. Until the defender takes the offensive and puts at risk something of great value to the attacker—or defeats them in battle and then goes on the offensive to impose their will on the attacker's civilian populace—the attacker won't give up. Indeed, the protracted conflicts of the Middle East from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Iran-Iraq War to the Israel-Hizballah and Israel-Hamas confrontations all demonstrate this rule of war.

Yet the American strategy toward Yemen right now is purely defensive. American ships intercept Houthi missiles fired at maritime traffic in the Bab el-Mandeb, and now American aircraft and ships mount pre-emptive attacks on Houthi missiles being readied for firing. That is a purely defensive strategy. It is historically unlikely that it will be enough to convince the Houthis to stop.

### **Reviving the Reagan Doctrine for Yemen**

If that proves correct, then the United States is going to have to adopt a different strategy, probably as a complement to its defensive operations. One that can put at risk something that the Houthis value more than everything they are currently getting from their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. And because they are getting so much from it in their own eyes, what the U.S. puts at risk is going to have to be something of great value to them.

Historically, there is only one thing that the Houthis have demonstrated matters more to them than anything else, and that is their control over Yemeni territory.

In 2018, a land force of Yemeni tribesmen backed and spearheaded by several thousand UAE armor and special forces mounted a devastating drive from their base at Aden, up the Red Sea coast. This force repeatedly overwhelmed Houthi defensive positions, taking the port of Mokha and other towns, and threatening to take Hudaydah—at that point, the last major port in Houthi hands. The Houthis had no military capability to stop the Emirati-led assault and in their desperation, agreed to negotiate. Unfortunately, the United States agreed with the international perspective—amplified by Houthi propaganda—that a battle for Hudaydah would be a humanitarian catastrophe. Consequently, the Emirates and their Yemeni allies were forced to agree to terms that left Hudaydah in Houthi hands, because when the Houthis reneged on their commitments, the international community did nothing.

Likewise, as I noted above, when the Houthi offensive against Ma'rib was stymied by Emirati-trained and equipped ROYG forces (backed by Saudi airstrikes) in 2022, once again the Houthis agreed to negotiate a ceasefire agreement. What both of these incidents demonstrate is that what the Houthis value most is their possession of Yemeni territory, and only when that is threatened will they agree to compromises and concessions. Consequently, if the United States and its allies are going to convince the Houthis (and the Iranians) to halt the attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, we are going to have to create a similar threat.

So far, the American people have shown little inclination to employ American ground forces in Yemen, nor should we do so. It is unnecessary to achieve our objectives, and potentially harmful if we do so poorly, as we did so in Iraq before the Surge and in Afghanistan throughout our 20-year involvement there.

Instead, we should look to various examples from the 1980s when the United States covertly armed and assisted indigenous forces fighting against countries or other groups inimical to our interests. The Mujahideen in Afghanistan were the best known and among the most successful. However, the Forces Armées Nationales Tchadiennes (FANT) in Chad arguably won an even greater victory over Libyan forces that would ultimately play an important role in undermining Muammar Qadhafi's regime and defanging his aggressive designs on North Africa. Likewise, the Nicaraguan Contras ultimately forced the Daniel Ortega government to agree to real elections in 1990 that ousted Ortega and the Soviet-backed Sandinistas from power. The same approach yielded more mixed results in the case of Angola, but it did force the Soviet-backed MPLA to agree to real elections in 1992 in which UNITA was able to compete and secure a draw.

In Yemen, employing the same approach would mean arming, equipping, and training ROYG forces. Although some advanced anti-tank guided missiles and other systems might be provided, most of the arms should be old Soviet weapons. In Yemen, 1950's vintage T-55 tanks and D-30 artillery pieces are still the kings and queens of the battlefield and there is no need to provide the ROYG with the same kinds of equipment that the Ukrainians so desperately require

to fend off the Russian invasion. And all of this would be best done by the paramilitary resources of the CIA, rather than by the U.S. armed forces.

It would ideally also mean continuing to employ American air and naval assets to defend shipping in the Red Sea, to degrade Houthi military assets, and to interdict Iranian weapons shipments to the Houthis, although the last has proven difficult. The United States also might consider providing direct air support to ROYG ground forces, which could be enormously helpful to them.

Moreover, the United States should maintain this military pressure on the Houthis not merely until they are ready to agree to cease attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, but until they are willing to lay down their arms and agree to a new political compact for Yemen that would restore a national government in which they could participate as individual Yemenis, able to organize as a political party but no more.

### **The Least Bad Option**

No policy proposal is ever without flaws and drawbacks. That is especially true when we contemplate policy options toward the Middle East at this moment in time when the United States has squandered so many opportunities in the past. I will only contend that the course of action I have outlined above is the least bad of all of our realistic courses of action.

The principal shortcoming of my proposed approach is that the ROYG is hardly a perfect partner. Again, it is largely a grab bag of political and tribal entities whose only bond is their hatred of the Houthis. They could easily fall apart as soon as the Houthis are defeated, and possibly even before then.

While that is a serious liability and would need to be integrated into American plans, it need not be a showstopper. The Afghan Muj were just as fissiparous, and of course, their alliance *did* fall apart as soon as the Soviets were evicted. However, that example also furnishes a useful remedy: America's greatest mistake in Afghanistan was to walk away after the Soviet retreat. Had we truly waged "Charlie Wilson's War," and maintained our engagement afterwards, there is reason to believe that Afghanistan might have worked out very differently and likely without the Taliban in charge.

In fact none of the opposition groups the United States backed in the 1980s and '90s were perfect partners. They were all horribly flawed in various ways. Yet they all accomplished important missions in defense of vital American interests. We should take heart from those accomplishments even while preparing to address the ROYG's deficiencies in ways we simply did not with the Muj, the FANT, the Contras, or UNITA.

As for the likely alternatives, they all seem worse to me. Less likely to accomplish America's goals and at higher cost.

I have noted the flaws with the Administration's current approach, even while I appreciate their willingness to defend American interests in ways that neither of their predecessors were.

While I do not oppose the idea of striking directly against Iranian targets, particularly Iranian military and intelligence targets, I am skeptical that it will achieve our goals in Yemen. The Houthis have their own interests at play, and their gains are so significant that if their hold on Yemen is not threatened, I am very skeptical that Tehran could order them to desist from further attacks in the Red Sea even if direct American strikes on Iranian assets convinced Khamene'i that he should try to do so. Again, the Houthis are allies of Iran, not proxies, and they are like rabid dogs, extremely difficult to control and likely to bite the hand that feeds them.

Over the past ten years and following the Israeli model, the United States has leaned ever more heavily on targeted killings as a tactic against difficult Middle Eastern actors. This, what I call “War by Assassination,” can certainly help degrade an adversary, but it so far has not won a war by itself. Moreover, neither we nor the Israelis have yet succeeded in employing it to coerce an enemy. Despite a sustained, successful campaign of targeted killings by Israel, Iran has not shut down its nuclear program, and to the extent it has halted it at times, these halts have come as a result of diplomacy backed by harsh sanctions and the threat of more massive force. The Israeli assassination campaign may have impeded its work, but that is all it can claim, and it is not even clear that it did that.

America’s own campaigns of targeted killing—against ISIS, the Iranian-backed Hashd ash-Shaabi groups in Iraq, against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and elsewhere—have also hurt those groups by killing important leaders, but none were sufficient to get any of them to halt their nefarious activities or even their attacks on Americans. The highest profile of all targeted killings, that of Qasim Sulaymani in 2020, is also the best illustration. Because Sulaymani was uniquely talented and trusted by Khamene’i, his death was a major blow to Iran’s aggressive expansion across the Middle East and left Tehran and its allies in a state of disarray for several years. However, it did not convince Iran to give up its violent campaign to dominate the Middle East. It may even have given it additional impetus.

To end my remarks by bringing the topic back to the advantages of this course of action, it is the only one of those proposed that offers the prospect of destroying Houthi military power altogether. That would certainly not happen quickly, but it is a feasible long-term prospect. And doing so would be an enormous blow to Iran, depriving it of an important ally in a critical part of the world. What’s more, it would give heart to America’s allies that the United States was no longer surrendering the Middle East to Iran, or even relegated to merely playing defense while Iran attacks everywhere it can until it inevitably finds a chink in the armor it can exploit.

Aiding the government of Yemen’s coalition to take the fight to the Houthis and push them out of areas they have taken over would be a critical signal to our allies that the United States is finally ready to help them take back their lives and their lands. Nothing could have a more salutary effect on a region that desperately needs to believe that a better path is possible and that they are not being abandoned by the United States to Tehran’s suzerainty.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Director Pollack.  
We now recognize Dr. Alterman for an opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF JON ALTERMAN, PhD, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI CHAIR IN GLOBAL SECURITY AND GEOSTRATEGY, AND DIRECTOR, MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

Mr. ALTERMAN. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Connolly, it is an honor to appear before the committee once again.

The Houthis are a paradox, a rag-tag military operating on a shoestring budget that does not even represent a State should not be a difficult adversary for the most powerful military in the world.

Similarly, it should be easy for the United States to build a broad military coalition to protect freedom of navigation through seas that carry about 20 percent of global container trade and is a key conduit of both energy and manufactured goods to Europe. And yet here we are with Houthi forces continually threatening global shipping and the United States working principally with UK partners to strike at Houthi targets while our regional allies and NATO partners keep their distance.

Some call for robust U.S. military strikes in Iran to punish the Iranian government for all of its destabilizing regional actions. Some call for crushing the Houthis completely.

I understand the attraction of decisively asserting U.S. military power, yet doing so without clear forethought would actually advance Iranian goals rather than U.S. ones and would not do much to stabilize Yemen.

As I outlined in my written remarks, the United States faces at least five threats in Yemen. The first is that the United States actually boosts the Houthis when they demonstrate resilience after comprehensive U.S. effort to destroy their capabilities.

This plays into a narrative that their mere survival represents a victory. We do not want the Houthis to present themselves as among the fiercest and most resilient fighters in the Middle East.

The second is that the United States glides down a slippery slope of increased military engagement in Yemen divorced from the scale of U.S. interests there.

I worry that this moment would be part of a long cycle of U.S. engagement in, and disengagement from Yemen, which has often been linked to counterterrorism and which has helped nurture greater violence in Yemen.

The third danger is that the United States precipitates an even greater humanitarian disaster in Yemen or is perceived to do so. I can see circumstances in which the United States is accused of instigating the spread of famine and disease in Yemen with Iran, Russia, China, and some regional media amplifying that message.

The fourth is that we fall into an Iranian trap, sucked into a grinding, open-ended conflict in the region that continues to put U.S. troops at risk without increasing regional security. This will ultimately undermine both the region's and the American public's willingness to sustain a military presence.

The fifth is that the battle in Yemen deepens the rift between the United States and partner militaries. It is both remarkable and



worrying that key NATO allies and key regional allies want nothing to do with any military operations in Yemen.

No one can consider it sustainable when the U.S. is one of only a handful of countries willing to fight to defend public goods. And when close partners seek to benefit from U.S. actions without contributing to them, that is, of course, the world that many of our adversaries in the Middle East and around the world would like to see. And I could imagine U.S. military action in Yemen hastening its realization.

The Iranians and the Houthis do not fight fair. They feel their relative weakness and the virtue of their cause justifies breaking the rules of war. They are skilled at using asymmetrical tactics, and they position themselves to portray their mere survival as victory.

We do not fight that way. But we are overwhelmingly the stronger power, and we have things that each side believes it needs. There is a role for our military strength, but we should not forget that it is just a tool. Our ambition isn't military victory. It is using military instruments to provoke our adversaries to make a political decision to change. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Alterman follows:]



**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee  
on Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia**

***“A Strategic Approach  
to Red Sea Security”***

A Testimony by:

**Dr. Jon B. Alterman**

Senior Vice President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security  
and Geostrategy, and Director, Middle East Program, Center for  
Strategic and International Studies

**February 14, 2024**

**2172 Rayburn House Office Building**

Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Connolly, distinguished members of the subcommittee, I am honored to share my views with you on this hearing entitled, "Iran's Proxy in Yemen: The Houthi Threat to Middle East Stability, Global Shipping, and U.S. Servicemembers." CSIS does not take policy positions, so the views represented in this testimony are my own and not those of my employer. In my testimony, I would like to lay out a strategic approach to Red Sea security.

The Houthis are a paradox. A rag-tag military operating on a shoestring budget, which doesn't even represent a state, should not be a difficult adversary for the most powerful military in the world. Similarly, it should be easy for the United States to build a broad military coalition to protect freedom of navigation through seas that carry about 20 percent of global container trade and is a key conduit of both energy and manufactured goods to Europe. And yet, here we are, with Houthi forces continually threatening global shipping, and the United States working principally with UK partners to strike at Houthi targets, while regional allies and NATO partners keep their distance.

There is a way to see the Houthis mostly as a function of Iran's malevolence and regional mischief-making. Some call for robust U.S. military strikes on Iran to punish the Iranian government for all of its destabilizing regional actions. Some call for crushing the Houthis completely. I understand the attraction of the logic of asserting U.S. military power and decisively deterring our adversaries. Yet, doing so without clear forethought would actually advance Iranian goals rather than U.S. ones, and they wouldn't do much to stabilize Yemen. Deterrence, after all, requires a lot more than military might. It requires understanding the motivations, goals, preferences, and perceptions of one's adversaries. It also requires an ability to assure those adversaries that if their behavior improves, their conditions will improve as well. Most fundamentally, the way deterrence works is it provokes our adversaries to make political choices.

Too often when we talk about deterrence, we really mean compellence. We see it as a military task with military outcomes. Compellence is much harder than deterrence because it requires public concessions that have political costs that governments are often loath to pay. Often, they calculate that they are better off absorbing our military hits and rallying the public around the flag than looking weak to their people. When we fall into the trap of escalating without success, we advance our adversaries' political agenda despite degrading their military capabilities. In the process, we get no closer to changing the behavior we are seeking to reform.

Let me begin by discussing the Houthis. They are a robust, battle-tested guerilla force based in the highlands of Northern Yemen that has been fighting the Yemeni and Saudi governments for much of the last two decades. Their supporters are for the most part poor and deeply alienated, and they complain that their cultural mores are being destroyed by a combination of cosmopolitan elites and Saudi-inspired religious revivalists, both of whom work at the behest of foreign powers. The Yemeni highlands have a long history of enthusiasm for weapons and marksmanship, and tribal militias and other security forces have been an important part of their identity for many years. Some of the Houthis' sentiments should not seem foreign to us.

As the Yemeni government began to crumble in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Houthis spread decisively out of the North and at one point seemed poised to seize the entire country.

Yemen has a mosaic of tribes and sectarian affiliations (as well as a significant and diverse non-tribal population), but the Houthis were able to co-opt and coerce large areas, and they now rule over more than 70 percent of Yemen's population.

The Houthis' revenues come from a combination of war profiteering, racketeering, smuggling, and taxation. Rather than build the national economy of Yemen, they have further immiserated it.

Iran did not create the Houthi movement, but it has long seen it as useful. In part, supporting the Houthis was a way to torment Saudi Arabia, which the Iranians have long seen as their principal regional challenge. A secure Saudi Arabia could turn its attention to Iran, but one that was preoccupied with challenges from Yemen—as Saudi Arabia has been off and on for many decades—would need to disperse its energies. In addition, Iranian investments in the Houthis gave Iran leverage in their dealings with Saudi Arabia. The Houthis, for their part, had their own longstanding grievances with Saudi Arabia and were delighted to have an external patron.

Iranian support for the Houthis is relatively new, however, and it is largely opportunistic. When the Houthi insurgency began 20 years ago and targeted both the Yemeni and Saudi governments, it did not enjoy significant Iranian support. As a sporadic insurgency morphed into a civil war, the Houthis took Sana'a in 2015. They also did this without significant Iranian support, although their success did prompt Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to unleash what he promised would be a quick and decisive strike against them. In practice, this was neither quick nor decisive. The Iranians only started intervening in a serious way in 2017, after the Houthis had independently established both their bona fides and their ability to strike back at the Saudis. That aid has included both ballistic missiles and drones.

For Iran, the Houthis have never been a core interest like Iraq or Syria, or a multi-billion-dollar investment like the one Iran has made in Hezbollah. Instead, the Houthis have been a low-cost way to give Iran additional regional reach. They represent a modest investment in regional forces that reject the legitimacy of the status quo. Qassem Soleimani, the former head of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), helped develop the idea of Iran building an "Axis of Resistance" in the Middle East. To a great extent, this wasn't about extending Iranian control throughout the region. Instead, the idea was that with lesser funds and looser control, Iran could extend its influence everywhere. Because it is easier to destroy than to build, and because it is easier to influence than control, Iran's strategy was aligned with its constrained resources. As I read it, the message Iran was seeking to send is that if Iran does not feel secure, no one else will feel secure, either.

In this context, consider the Iranians' and the Houthis' strategic goals here. The Iranians' are much more expansive. They are seeking to become a more prominent regional power. To achieve that, they believe the U.S. presence in the region needs to be reduced. Of course, Iran's regional ambitions persuade regional countries they need the United States to stay. Here we are seeing the Iranian strategy coming into focus.

A large part of Iran's strategy is increasing hostility to the U.S. regional presence in the region itself. That means both capitalizing on regional hostility to U.S. military support for Israel, and also persuading governments and publics alike that the United States is a wantonly violent and

militarily ineffective power that brings chaos rather than stability to the Middle East. Investing in proxy forces that provoke U.S. reprisals is part of this.

Iran has also invested in ensuring that Iraq did not become either a political inspiration for the region or a base from which the United States could project power. It has also invested in relatively modest attacks on U.S. partners that fall below the threshold of eliciting U.S. reprisals, but which are attributable to Iran. This causes many neighbors to question the value of U.S. support, and to find ways to placate Iran. Of course, Iran aligns its messaging criticizing purported U.S. hegemony with both Russia and China, who have their own reasons to increase resistance to the U.S. military presence in the Middle East.

Undermining U.S. domestic support for Middle East deployments is also part of Iran's strategy. It seeks to draw the United States into a new series of diverse, dispersed, and open-ended military engagements in the Middle East that have no obvious end point or condition of victory. In the wake of the Iraq war and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran is betting that the U.S. public has little appetite for another extended U.S. military engagement in the Middle East.

The Houthis have a somewhat narrower set of ambitions. They are poised to gain increased power in Yemen, and they believe that the Saudi effort to extract itself from an almost nine-year-old war will deliver Saudi aid and recognition. They think that demonstrating their military capabilities, as well as their willingness to strike militarily, enhances their negotiating leverage with Saudi Arabia and increases their value to Iran, their significant external patron.

From a domestic perspective, Yemenis feel genuine sympathy for the Palestinians. The Houthis appearing to take action in solidarity with the Palestinians doesn't actually help the Palestinians in any way, but it does help the Houthis. It puts the public focus in Yemen on warfighting (where the Houthis are relatively skillful) rather than governance (where they are not). Anti-Houthi protests were escalating in September, and the Houthis had begun large-scale arrests of peaceful protestors. Rallying the public to support their defense of Palestinians moves the discourse to where the Houthis are more comfortable. In addition, presenting themselves as a worthy adversary of the United States enhances their prestige, portraying them as both strong and fearless.

For the United States, the bad options are more numerous than the good ones. In fact, it isn't clear there are any good ones.

Both Iran and the Houthis are playing a long game. The Iranians want Americans to tire of the Middle East, and they want the region to tire of the United States. The Houthis want everyone to tire of them and just give in. From the perspective of American policy, the Houthis consider our four-year presidential terms to be fleeting, and they are looking at decades of consolidated rule. They feel they can afford to hold on for years, because their expected payoff will last decades. American administrations want to solve problems and move on, often in just a few years. Both are keen to wait out the United States.

Each also benefits from low expectations for success vis-à-vis the United States. Their mere survival is a victory, and if 1 percent of their strikes are successful—such as Iranian-backed forces' recent attack on Tower 22 in Jordan—they consider it a great achievement.

They are both willing to strike out at any number of soft civilian targets—from commercial shipping to infrastructure—and they attack adversaries who have more to lose than they do. The Houthis in particular have little of value that can be held at risk. They have operated out of makeshift facilities for decades, and they have adjusted to life without sufficient food, running water, and electricity. Almost a decade of Saudi assaults has made them practiced at hiding their assets and moving quickly. They present a very small target space and setting them back is hard. They are expert at requiring their adversaries to use expensive weapons to disable their cheap ones.

It is an understandable impulse to simply use superior intelligence and firepower to push back on Iran and eliminate the Houthi threat decisively. This was the impetus behind Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's decision to attack Yemen in 2015, soon supported by the UAE. Paradoxically, these countries' assaults failed to push the Houthis from power, but they did significantly deepen Iranian-Houthi cooperation. Having fought the Houthis since then, they are eager for an exit from the war.

Yemen is widely understood to be the world's worst humanitarian crisis, and because much of Yemen's humanitarian suffering is in areas under Houthi control, the Houthis exploit their people's suffering by directing some aid shipments to allies, blocking some from adversaries, and taxing and pilfering from what gets through. The numbers are staggering. Something on the order of 400,000 Yemenis have died during this decade-long civil war. About half of Yemen's population of 34 million is severely food insecure, and 6 million are on the brink of famine. 5 million children and 1.3 million pregnant and lactating women are expected to require treatment for severe malnutrition this year. 4.5 million people have been displaced. The international humanitarian community remains deeply engaged.

It seems to me that the recent designation of the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group does several useful things. One is to impose penalties on the Houthis while making clear that harsher penalties could be forthcoming. The second is that it allows humanitarian organizations a little more freedom without the worry that any contact with the Houthis—who after all, are the prevailing authorities in much of the country—will result in crippling U.S. penalties.

Despite the despair in Yemen, there has been some progress. A truce that took effect in April 2022 has largely held, providing increased security for civilians. Negotiations between the Saudis, the government of Yemen, and the Houthis have made some progress, although it remains tentative. I hear consistent reports that both the Saudis and the Iranians fear that violence in Yemen could spin out of control and threaten their long-term interests, and they are keen to avoid it.

But the United States faces at least five threats in Yemen. The first is that the United States actually boosts the Houthis when they demonstrate resilience after comprehensive U.S. effort to destroy their capabilities. This plays into a narrative that their mere survival represents a victory. There is little question in my mind that the United States does not have the interest, will, or intention to push the Houthis from power, nor should we. But we may be helping the Houthis present themselves as among the fiercest and most resilient fighters in the Middle East.

The second is that the United States glides down a slippery slope of increased military engagement in Yemen that is divorced from the scale of U.S. interests there. I am not thinking that Yemen will be “our Vietnam”—which, parenthetically, Yemen became for Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt in the 1960s, when he deployed about 70,000 soldiers to Yemen in the 1960s to unsuccessfully put his thumb on the scale of an earlier Yemeni civil war. Instead, I worry that this moment will be part of a long cycle of U.S. engagement in and disengagement from Yemen.

The United States has alternately been deeply involved in counterterrorism and deradicalization efforts, only to shift its focus in a few short years and abandon Yemen to the forces of terrorism and radicalization, before it needs to intervene again. It is no secret that weapons we have supplied to Yemeni forces have been sold around the Middle East and used against U.S. troops in Iraq and elsewhere and have also bolstered the Houthis’ arsenals. It is also no secret that some of the forces fighting the Houthis have their own unsavory history and ties to jihadi groups. When I worked on Capitol Hill in the late 1980s, our support for the Taliban seemed to many to be a masterstroke because it tormented the Soviets in Afghanistan. There is less of a consensus today that our previous support for the Taliban is an experiment we should continue to replicate.

The third danger is that the United States precipitates an even greater humanitarian disaster in Yemen, or is perceived to do so. While the Houthis bear full responsibility for Yemenis’ misery, I could see circumstances in which the United States is accused of instigating the spread of famine and disease in Yemen, with Iran, Russia, China, and some regional media amplifying the message.

The fourth is that it falls into an Iranian trap, sucked into a grinding, open-ended conflict in the region that continues to put U.S. troops at risk without increasing regional security, and which ultimately undermines both the region’s and the American public’s willingness to sustain the U.S. military presence. The costs to Iran of pursuing this strategy are modest, and their timeframe is long. They doubt that we have either the will or the patience to prevail.

The fifth is that the battle in Yemen deepens the rift between the United States and partner militaries. It is both remarkable and worrying that key NATO allies and key regional allies want no public association with any military operations in Yemen, and about half of the 22-member defensive coalition want to do so secretly. While I will leave it to these governments to explain their decision making, no one can consider it sustainable when the United States is one of only a handful of countries willing to fight to defend public goods, and when close partners seek to benefit from U.S. actions without contributing to them. That is, of course, the world that many of our adversaries in the Middle East and around the world would like to see, and I could imagine U.S. military action in Yemen hastening its realization.

The option of striking Iran directly appeals to many, and I accept that the risk of sharp escalation from Iran is modest. While it has threatened to do so, Iran has not exacted retribution for the assassination of former Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, although several former U.S. officials have enduring U.S. government-provided protection because of credible and persistent Iranian threats against their safety.

Yet, Iran’s strategic response to the Soleimani assassination under President Raisi has proven disappointingly successful. Iran has abandoned efforts to engage the United States, it has deepened

its ties with Russia and China, it has improved its relations with its immediate neighbors, and it has enhanced the capabilities of the so-called “Axis of Resistance,” in part by giving these groups greater freedom to pursue their agendas than they had under Soleimani while remaining strategically aligned with Iran. In my assessment, the previous U.S. policy of “maximum pressure” did not work and was not poised to work even if it had more time. Instead, it transformed what was a broad and cooperative international effort against the Iran nuclear program into a bilateral confrontation between Iran and the United States that freed Iran from both constraints and supervision of its nuclear program.

My point is not that we should be soft on Iran, any more than we should be soft on the Houthis. Instead, my point is that in order to deter either one, their leaderships need to feel they have a choice, whereby one pathway provides pain while another provides relief. We are not good at providing such a choice, in part because I strongly suspect that both the Iranian government and the Houthis will be doing things that we find offensive—and that I find offensive—for many years to come. But partly, too we keep thinking that enough pressure or the right kind of pressure will flip our adversaries. In so doing, we miss two important ingredients to our own success: that they must have confidence we will relieve pressure if they behave in the ways we prescribe, and they must not feel that our pressure actually benefits them. That is harder than it seems. In the case of Iran, for example, regime insiders run the smuggling networks that circumvent U.S. sanctions and profit from them. In many cases, they fear the lifting of sanctions more than the imposition of additional ones.

We need to see this conflict as a fundamentally political issue for which we need to use military instruments, rather than a military problem with military solutions. Our goal needs to be to persuade the governments of Iran and the Houthis to make different choices, and not merely seek to defeat them on the battlefield. The Houthis in particular are deeply engaged in negotiations that will determine their future role in Yemen, and the United States has many tools to influence those talks. That, and not the firing of missiles in the Red Sea, will determine their future.

The issue is not that anyone doubts U.S. military capacity. The Iranians and the Houthis enter this battle with the firm knowledge that the U.S. military can destroy any target on the planet. And yet, they also see the U.S. military as an institution that often has struggled to achieve a clean victory over the last three-quarters of a century.

These are forces that feel that their relative weakness and the virtue of their cause justifies breaking the rules of war. They are skilled at using asymmetrical tactics, and they have positioned themselves to portray mere survival as victory. We do not fight that way. But we are overwhelmingly the stronger power, and we have things that each side believes it needs. There is a role for our military strength, but we also must understand that it is only through the other tools of statecraft that we will win.



Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much. And I thank each of you for your testimony and to show extraordinary bipartisanship, Congressman Connolly and I agree on something, that we all limit it to 5 minutes, even Congresswoman Manning.

So 5 minutes, Congressman Bair. And I know he always follows through. With that in mind, again, I want to thank all of you for being here. Please begin the 5-minutes.

I've had a long time interest sadly visiting 4 years ago an exhibit of downed drones that have been taken by Saudi Arabia by the United Arab Emirates. And these drones, some had a—we are not talking about ones you see at the grocery store, \$39.95. These have a wing span of 30 feet. And they were to deliver munitions for indiscriminate killing of civilians.

And indeed, it was also quite clear, in English, virtually every one of them had been made in Iran. So there was no question where they came from. And so to me, we have got to address this for benefit of freedom of navigation in our country.

Additionally, I am very grateful, too, that we need to stand together for freedom to have peace through strength, and we need to address and know that freedom is not free. And I, particularly, sympathize sadly with the three Georgia Army Reservists who were killed. And I have had sons serve in Iraq, Egypt, and Afghanistan. All four of my sons have served in the global war on terrorism, which is not over. The terrorists have many plans for us, which is really clear, of death to America, death to Israel.

With all of that in mind, and I do want to congratulate Secretary Ledeem, you do have clear forethought. So you all should get together with the different points that you have. And we need to be clear. And in particular the providing of funding by oil sales is just totally out of what should be done to actually promote peace through strength in the world.

With that in mind, Secretary Ledeem, why did the Biden Administration choose not to apply the stronger of two designations given on the foreign terrorist organization designation which criminalizes providing materials, support, and resources, which is so desperately needed to control the Iran puppets?

Ms. LEDEEN. Chairman Wilson, thanks for the opportunity to respond.

I think first and foremost, it is clear that the Biden Administration from the beginning of this conflict has done the bare minimum. I think they realize that there is a political outcry because global shipping has been put at risk.

So to continue to do nothing was not acceptable. So instead the decision clearly has been made to do in terms of putting new sanctions, the bare minimum. So redesignating the Houthis as a specially designated under a Treasury Department designation rather than the stronger foreign terrorist organization designation, so in order to say we have done something.

But I would compare that, sir, to the responses that we are seeing militarily, defensive in nature only, so in order to say they are doing something. But the reality is our partners and allies, and unfortunately the IRGC and their Houthis proxies, see very clearly that we are not taking real action. And so the attacks are con-

tinuing, and they will continue until a more forceful response is initiated.

Mr. WILSON. And Director Pollack, indeed, the lack of response to me is very troubling because we have had attacks by the puppets of Iran that affect 40 different countries. This is not just America, not just the United Kingdom. And the effect of delivering grain to countries, causing potential starvation around the world, this is a defensive action on our part. What more can we do to degrade the Iranian capabilities in the Red Sea?

Mr. POLLACK. I think we need to recognize that Iran is trying to wage war against the United States and its allies all across the region. The Red Sea is one theater. And the Houthis are one actor in that.

And I think that what we need to recognize is that we need to push back on the Iranians everywhere. The best way that we can push back on the Iranians everywhere is by helping our allies everywhere. And unfortunately for the last, at least 15 years, and let's recognize it has been under the last two Administrations, including this one, that our allies have felt time and again that the United States has not been there to support them. That they have been forced to take on the Iranians on their own.

And as a result, we have seen our allies make compromises with the Iranians, mostly recently, and I think most flagrantly, the agreement between the Saudis and the Iranians brokered by the Chinese. Again, too much has been made of that, but nonetheless, it is a clear sign that these are all countries, allies of ours, that simply do not believe that the United States is supporting them and that therefore they have to make compromises which they did not want to make.

Mr. WILSON. Director, thank you. I thank each of you. And now I proceed to Congressman Gerry Connolly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I am going to defer to Mr. Sherman.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you. If there ever was a foreign terrorist organization, it is the Houthi. We have not designated them. We are not designating them because that could possibly interfere with feeding the people they rule.

This would come as a shock to General Douglas MacArthur if in the day after Pearl Harbor he had been informed that his No. 1 objective was to feed the civilians of Japan.

Those who cheer the Houthi, who shout their praises, claim to be progressives. They should take responsibility for the death that the Houthi have caused not just in Yemen but elsewhere.

You see 20 percent of Ukraine's grain exports go through the Red Sea, similar amounts from other countries. When that grain price goes up, people in East Africa and Ethiopia and Tigray and poor parts of South Asia do not eat as much. They cannot afford it. And they die. Not wasting disease that you can capture on a video, but rather they are eating two meals instead of three, and that increases their susceptibility to death.

I would like without objection to put in the record an article from The Advocate, perhaps the leading LGBTQ+ publication in America, which is headlined, Houthi Court Sentences 13 Men to Public Execution for Gay Sex.

Now that is just one court in one province at one time. How many members of the LGBTQ+ are brutally killed by the Houthi year in and year out? So there is blood on the hands of the Houthi. There is blood on the hands of those who prevent us from taking effective action against them and shout their praises. And I see that blood is actually on the hands of people visible to me right now.

OK. I would ask for some additional time. I think Dr. Pollack, you had it exactly right. We cannot limit ourselves to just trying to prevent the Houthi—reduce the amount by which the Houthi intercept shipping. We have to provide weapons to the legitimate government of Yemen and its allies.

Dr. Pollack, Iran benefits from freedom of navigation around the world. Is it morally right that not a single Iranian ship has been stopped by the U.S. Navy, even for a day, when Iran interferes with the Commerce of the entire world?

Mr. POLLACK. The morality of it I simply am not qualified to comment on. Strategically, what I will say is that the United States has chosen not to do so repeatedly for a wide variety of reasons.

But I think that it is important. I think that the question that you are asking, Congressman, is a very important one. And it should be on the table.

As my dear friend, Dr. Alterman, has pointed out, the Iranians do not fight by the rules. They do not play by the rules. And we have handcuffed ourselves time and again in trying to respond effectively by doing so when they choose not to.

We are confronted all across the region by a very determined, wile and unscrupulous adversary. We owe it to put all of the options on the table and consider them.

Mr. SHERMAN. So if a ship taking luxury goods to Iran was delayed for a day or two, would Tehran get the message?

Mr. POLLACK. They might very well. We have seen that in the past, the Iranians are incredibly cautious and respectful of American military power. When they believe that there is no threat that we will employ it, they do whatever they can. When they believe that there is a chance we will employ it, they suddenly become much more cautious and respectful.

Mr. SHERMAN. I would finally point out that they have a durable cease-fire in Gaza. We need to see Hamas leave Gaza just as we saw in 1982 when a terrorist left Lebanon. And a durable cease-fire cannot exist if Hamas is there because they have already declared.

They want to repeat October 7 again and again until the blood of Israelis flows again and again. That is the goal of Hamas, and that is the goal of those who support Hamas.

Mr. WILSON. I would like to remind the audience that disruption of committee proceedings is against the law. Holding up signs or making verbal, ignorant outbursts during the proceedings is disruptive, the ignorant outbursts, particularly.

Any disruptions will result in a suspension of proceedings until the Capitol Police can restore order. And indeed there should be understanding there are people here who want peace through

strength. With that, I now recognize the Congressman from Georgia, Congressman Dr. Veteran Rich McCormick.

Mr. McCORMICK. I believe there is more people to remove, Mr. Chair, but I will start for now.

I appreciate the witnesses' willingness to be here and to point out some very important things to us, both strategically and morally that I think will affect the future of the United States and global peace, which is ultimately what every warrior wants.

Anybody who has ever put their life on the line to go overseas for their nation does not want war. I do not want my sons to go serve overseas and die. I want them to live. I want them to live in peace.

With that, I think it is very important to recognize what we have done and what the consequences are. In February 2021, the Biden Administration removed the Houthis, which were on the foreign terrorist organization designation and their specially designated terrorist group designation when the Trump Administration had put it in place.

At the time, Secretary Blinken cited humanitarian concerns as the reasons for these decisions, saying that the humanitarian aid could not reach the Yemen people if these designations remain in place.

I want to make a few points I went on the fire freshman CODEL to Bangladesh, the largest refugee camp in the world, a million people have been displaced through violence who are living off of now \$8 per person per month.

There is people all over—we have a record number of refugees all over the world right now starving, displaced, being raped, being killed constantly. And yet we are more worried about idealism than realism when it comes to who we aid and who we abet.

And this is the problem. When we talk about worrying about designations so that we can help a people that the money is not even getting to, that the help is not even getting to when you have an evil regime that is keeping the food from getting to the people who need it most.

And instead, we have created an environment where the Iranians. When we are talking about realism and who we are trying to assist and who we are trying to claim as our friends—I think it goes without saying that I will reclaim my time.

OK. Very good. Thank you. Ms. Ledeen, do you believe that the Biden Administration's reasoning for removing the Houthis from the FTO designation was accurate and the correct step in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Yemen?

Ms. LEDEEN. No, I do not.

Mr. McCORMICK. Do you think that the aid that has been forthcoming goes to the right people?

Ms. LEDEEN. No, I do not.

Mr. McCORMICK. Exactly my point. I think we need to be more concerned in supporting the resistance in Iran, for example, those people who would stand up against the injustices against women and children, against education, against rights.

And there we go with the absolute understanding of realism versus idealism. Iran is an evil regime. It is a theocracy that op-

presses its people. It has kept women from their natural God given rights.

And yet we are more concerned with not getting food to the people that when we give aid to these corrupt agencies than we are with a resistance to a regime that is actually supporting all of our enemies, all around the world, and actually trying to kill Americans to the hundreds and thousands of efforts with armed aggression toward our troops overseas.

We have lost Navy SEALs. We have lost Army National Guard. We have lost American lives. And we have put them in jeopardy every single day for the last, not just several months, but several years because of our policy.

Dr. Pollack, how would you explain the Biden Administration's seemingly timid defensive response to the Houthi aggression? Is it fair to speculate that it is due in part to the Administration's desire to revive the Iran nuclear deal?

Mr. POLLACK. Congressman, first I would encourage you to have the Administration come and defend its own policies. But since you have asked me to speculate, I can certainly do so. I do suspect that that is part of what is going on. I think that they are hoping that at some point they can get back to it. And I think that just broadly speaking their approach has been to assume that negotiations are most likely when you start by making concessions to the other side.

I understand the logic behind that, but historically, I do not think that it is ever proven to be accurate. People come to the table when they have a reason to do so. If you remove that reason for coming to the table, they either do not come or they show up not believing that they have to actually make concessions.

Mr. MCCORMICK. Well put, sir. It has been my experience in my over 20 years of Marine Corps and Navy experience around the world, whether it be in Africa, or the Middle East, or the Far East, or anywhere else we are in combatant zones, that evil people only understand one thing, and that's strength, and that's what creates peace, not weakness, not concessions.

And I think whether it be President Carter, President Obama, or President Biden, what I have seen is that every time we give concessions, bad things are the result. And therefore, I would encourage my allies on both sides of the aisle, and I think we have made really good points from both sides of the aisle, to recognize evil and to deal with it accordingly. And with that, I yield.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Dr. McCormick. And we now proceed to Congressman Gerry Connolly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Dr. Alterman, welcome back. Good to see you again. Ms. Ledeen and others have characterized the Biden Administration response to the Houthi threat as timid. Do you share that view?

Mr. ALTERMAN. I would describe it as cautious rather than timid. But I would argue the Trump Administration was rather timid about the Houthis as well. After all—

Mr. CONNOLLY. The one that Ms. Ledeen worked for?

Mr. ALTERMAN. I am not, sir. Actually, I am a historian. And I am sorry, I am a historian.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I was just saying the pot calling the kettle black just needs to be called out.

Mr. ALTERMAN. Exactly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So go ahead.

Mr. ALTERMAN. The gentleman from Virginia and I worked together when he was a young man, and I was a very young man. So we go back a little while.

The Trump Administration did not designate the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization until the last days, the last 2 days of the Trump Administration.

There are excruciatingly difficult problems involved with characterizing the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization, in particular well-meaning people attempting to save lives——

Mr. CONNOLLY. I know, I have got to interrupt you. I only have 5 minutes.

Mr. ALTERMAN. OK.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So got it. So part of this timid characterization apparently seems to be we are not willing to go in more forcefully militarily to address the Houthi threat in the Red Sea and elsewhere.

Remind us, was there not a pretty forceful military intervention by the Saudis in Yemen against the Houthi for some period of time?

Mr. ALTERMAN. There has been an almost 9-year effort by the Saudis. The Saudis are now trying to negotiate their way out of——

Mr. CONNOLLY. Dr. Alterman, please, answer the question. I did not ask that part. I am getting there. I am getting there.

Mr. ALTERMAN. Sorry, sir.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So how did that work out for the Saudis? Nine years of kinetic involvement that apparently others want the United States to emulate?

Mr. ALTERMAN. In fact it was only 2 years into the Saudi engagement in Yemen that the Iranians got deeply involved with providing precisely the weapons that the chairman referred to. That did not start at the beginning.

Mr. CONNOLLY. But Dr. Pollack made the point——

Mr. ALTERMAN. That was already 2 years into the Saudi War.

Mr. CONNOLLY [continuing]. But Dr. Pollack made the point, a good one, I thought, that the Houthis, what they care about is territory. Did the Houthis expand or contract territory during this 9 year interval of Saudi aggression?

Mr. ALTERMAN. My recollection it was mostly a stalemate. There was an initial period where they lost some territory, and things have been——

Mr. CONNOLLY. So if one of the goals of the Saudis was to restrict the Houthis and to regain territory, it apparently did not work, is that correct?

Mr. ALTERMAN. Correct.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right, it did not work. So it isn't timidity for the Saudis now to look at other options, one of which is engagement. Is that fair?

Mr. ALTERMAN. Yes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And would it be fair to say and the United States is encouraging that because of the lack of results of the alternative that was indeed tried over a 9-year period?

Mr. ALTERMAN. As well as the concern that there could be an open-ended regional conflict with no obvious endpoint.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Again, you are going far afield.

Mr. ALTERMAN. Sorry, sir.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Your brilliance precedes you, but you are answering questions not yet asked. But OK, that was my next one. What are the risks of the United States now with the best of intentions, deciding to expand its military response to the Houthi attacks? What are the risks of that? What could go wrong?

Mr. ALTERMAN. Well, one risk is that the Houthis keep doing it, and we look ineffectual. One risk is that we end up in an open-ended conflict defending soft targets all over the world that are hard to defend. The problem is we have to be successful 100 percent of the time. And if we are successful 99 percent of the time, our adversaries point to the 1 percent, and our people point to the 1 percent, and we look like we are failing instead of succeeding.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Is there a reason to believe that the engagement that the Administration and the Saudis are involved in with the Houthis has promise of any kind of success?

Mr. ALTERMAN. I think it has promise of some success. I agree very much with Ken that you have to come into negotiations strong. But I also think that you have to be willing to let bad people get something, not because you like them but because they are a reality.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And that something for the Houthis is ultimately a participation in governance of Yemen.

Mr. ALTERMAN. I think participation, not control.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right.

Mr. ALTERMAN. Participation in governance.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank you. And I thank you, Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Congressman Connolly, for abiding by the 5-minute rule. We now proceed to Congressman Jim Baird of Indiana.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank our witnesses for being here today. You know, on Monday, the terrorist organization, the Houthis we have been talking a lot about here, I will call them terrorist because that is what they really are. But they launched an attack on an Iran bound grain cargo ship.

And as you know, Iran is a major Houthi ally. And this attack makes it clear that they were just widely targeting ships without a direct motive. And they claim that their strikes have been a response to the situation in Gaza. However, they have been targeting the ships that have absolutely no links to Israel.

So are the Houthis using the war on Israel as an excuse to organize these inconsistent attacks? And can you explain the actual impact that these attacks have had on agricultural goods through the Bab al-Mandab? So Secretary Ledeem, would you want to start that discussion?

Ms. LEDEEN. Yes, thank you. I think it is important to look at the Houthi decisionmaking in the framework of being effectively and actually a proxy of Iran. So they are part of this regional escalation that Iran has underway right now. And they are one—you know, the analogy has been made frequently that the Iranian re-

gime is like an octopus, the head of the octopus, and there are many different tentacles, the Houthis being one.

So as we consider the decisionmaking of the Houthis, I think it is important to note Iran plays a very large role in that decision-making, especially as they provide a lot of the weapons that the Houthis are using. So I would characterize it that way.

In terms of the disruption of shipping, specifically of agricultural products, that is clearly one of their primary intents. They want to disrupt global shipping. They want to increase the prices. They want to hurt us.

In a way, we would think about it as effectively an Iranian sanction against us because they are raising the price of goods. And the longer this goes on, the higher these prices will become.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you. Dr. Pollack, do you have any thoughts on that?

Mr. POLLACK. Absolutely. I think that you are absolutely correct, Mr. Congressman, in that initially the Houthis did begin these attacks in hope of showing solidarity with the Palestinians because, as I mentioned, they were deeply, deeply unpopular in both the Arab and Muslim world beforehand. And this was a perfect opportunity for them to ingratiate themselves with both communities.

But I think you are exactly right that the Houthis are getting a tremendous amount from these attacks. This is exactly what they wanted. And what we've seen as the Administration has pointed out, they are attacking ships that have no connection to Israel whatsoever.

It is very useful for them. It is terrific for them to demonstrate their importance, their power in the world by shutting down or threatening to shut down one of the world's most important shipping routes.

Mr. BAIRD. Dr. Alterman, do you—

Mr. ALTERMAN. And, Congressman, the other important thing is the Houthis are really bad at governance. They are really bad at governance. They are very unpopular. But being at war means that they bring people together. There is solidarity that comes from being at a war footing. Yemen has been at war. A lot of people like using weapons in Yemen. And the weapons are on display.

There is a way in which being at war is much better for the Houthis because it means that people aren't criticizing them for being so bad at running Yemen.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you. I am about to run out of time so I think—I have got more questions, but I appreciate your answers. And I am going to yield back. Thank you.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Congressman Jim Baird. We now proceed to Congressman Brad Schneider of Illinois.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I want to thank you for calling this meeting. I want to thank the witnesses for being here. It is good to see you guys as always. Maybe I will start with Dr. Pollack.

When did the U.S. designate Hezbollah and Hamas as terrorist organizations? Do you remember?

Mr. POLLACK. I cannot answer that. I am sorry, Congressman.



Mr. SCHNEIDER. I can. I looked it up. But it was October 8, 1997. Was the U.S. right to designate Hezbollah and Hamas as terrorist organizations?

Mr. POLLACK. Absolutely.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. You do not want to disagree with that? Was the U.S. right to designate the Houthis as a terrorist organization, Dr. Pollack?

Mr. POLLACK. Yes, I would say they would. They certainly meet the definition.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. I think where we find ourselves—I am just going to tell my wife I cannot take her call right now—where we find ourselves, we face an immediate crisis with global implications. The Houthis are threatening global trade. They are citing excuses, but I think as you guys noted, they are achieving their own goals, covering up their inability to govern. And we need to address that crisis with great urgency.

But there is also a longer term crisis that has more local implications, regional implications, which is the crisis facing Yemen and the governance of Yemen, creating one of the largest, not the largest, humanitarian crisis in the world.

And the victims of this are the people of Yemen. And, you know, the Houthis have their own agenda, but it is certainly not to lift up the people of Yemen.

I mention Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, is there a common thread to those three organizations, Dr. Pollack?

Mr. POLLACK. Well, let's see, they all start with H in English.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. That's not what I had in mind, and you know that.

Mr. POLLACK. They are all backed by Iran.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Right.

Mr. POLLACK. They are all anti-American groups. They are all anti-Israel groups. They all employ violence against civilians to achieve their ends.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. And I am going to quote from your prepared comments, but Iran is our enemy not because we want them to be, but because the government of Iran wants us to be. Would the same be true of the Houthis?

Mr. POLLACK. Absolutely. I think as you know well, their slogan is God is great, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory to Islam.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Right. In fact as they cheer that and chant that cheer, they are saluting. Their salute is not the typical salute we think of, but it's the Nazi salute.

The Houthis are anti-American, anti-Israel, and anti-Semitic. And they are a threat, as I mentioned, to the region but also a threat to the people of Yemen.

Dr. Alterman, one of the things we have to do is not just interdict Iran from supporting the Houthis, but find a way to end that support. Any suggestions on what we can do in Congress to try to address that and change that support?

Mr. ALTERMAN. I think partly it is important to recall that the Houthis aren't really strategic for the Iranians. The Houthis are a little bit of a freebie. The Houthis only cost the Iranians maybe

about \$100 million a year, which is about twice what it costs to run a think tank in Washington, but very impactful, as you have said.

And I think we have to persuade the Iranians that the Houthis aren't worth it. And I worry that instead, we are persuading the Iranians the Houthis are totally worth it because we are getting wrapped around the axle in talking about a whole regional program.

And they are a regional threat as you say, but I think we have to right size the nature of the Houthi threat. I think degrading their military capabilities is the right thing. But getting into a war of wills over the Houthis, I worry, is going to leave them victorious and looking strong, and us looking weak.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. And I am running out of time, but I forget which of you said it, but you used the term coercion, and coercion is convincing, whether it is the Houthis or the Iranians, that the cost of the actions they are taking are far less—no the benefits of the actions they are taking are far less than the cost.

And we have to work to ratchet up the consequences and the cost for both the Houthis and the Iranians to change their course because we cannot allow the Houthis to disrupt global trade. And that is an interest not just for the United States but for all of our allies. And we cannot allow what is happening today to end hope for the people of Yemen who are suffering and deserve the right to govern themselves.

I am over my time with that. I yield back.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Congressman Brad Schneider. We now proceed to Congressman Michael Lawler of New York.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. When President Biden took office, he made a lot of ill thought out, and frankly foolish foreign policy decisions but at the top of the list was delisting the Houthis.

While the Houthis were a designated foreign terrorist organization under the Trump Administration for clear reasons, President Biden almost immediately took them off the list. He did this apparently in an attempt to encourage the Houthis to reduce hostilities, enter into talks, and improve the conditions for the Yemeni people, but shockingly just the opposite happened. The Houthis did not reduce hostilities, and instead renewed efforts to expand territorial control inside of Yemen.

We have also been unable to negotiate a meaningful resolution with the Houthis. And, of course, the Yemeni people are still living under oppression.

Dr. Pollack, can you go into some detail about the conditions and abuses the Yemeni people living under Houthi control have been living in for the past few years?

Mr. POLLACK. Briefly, Dr. Alterman began this. Houthis have terrible governance. They do not understand how to run a country. They never were particularly interested in doing so. I think they were surprised when they had the opportunity to do so.

The economy in Yemen is stalled badly. As we all know, there are enormous problems in terms of food distribution. Oil production—well, the Houthis have very little control over it. But in their area, there is very little going on.

And we also need to recognize that the international community has been very rightly concerned about the humanitarian situation in Yemen for many years. The Houthis have not. Very famously in 2018, a joint Yemen government and Emirati force was threatening to take the last Houthi controlled seaport of Hudaydah.

The world was terrified that there would be slaughter in Hudaydah. We descended upon the Emiratis. And the Yemeni government begged them to stop. They agreed to do so. The Houthis were forced to sign an agreement because they were about to lose Hudaydah. And the idea was they would leave Hudaydah to enable humanitarian supplies. They, of course, immediately reneged.

Mr. LAWLER. So that we are clear here, delisting the Houthis did nothing to help the Yemeni people and worsened regional security. In light of this Administration's failed policy and the Houthis continued aggression against the U.S., Ms. Ledeen, do you think the group should be relisted as an FTO?

Ms. LEDEEN. As soon as possible, yes.

Mr. LAWLER. Ms. Ledeen, do the Houthis meet all of the qualifications to be listed as an FTO?

Ms. LEDEEN. Absolutely, they do, yes.

Mr. LAWLER. And we passed a bill through this committee last week to require the relisting of the Houthis as an FTO. So from that bill and from this conversation and from my absolutely clear picture of what is happening in the Gulf region, it is my hope that the Administration does the right thing and relists them immediately as an FTO.

One of the bills that I passed through the House Foreign Affairs Committee was the SHIP Act, which I led with my friend and colleague, Jared Moskowitz.

This bill would establish new sanctions on entities that process illicit Iranian petroleum. Ports and refineries that facilitate Iran's oil trade are effectively financing the Iranian regime and its terrorist proxies.

It is no secret that Iran sends financial and material assistance to Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis just to name a few. Can you all confirm that Iran provides funding to terrorist groups in the region?

Ms. LEDEEN. Yes, they do.

Mr. POLLACK. Yes, absolutely.

Mr. ALTERMAN. Yes.

Mr. LAWLER. Do you all believe that the President and his Administration, State Department, and Defense Department know, just like all of you, that Iran funds these terrorist groups?

Ms. LEDEEN. There is no doubt, yes.

Mr. POLLACK. Yes, absolutely.

Mr. ALTERMAN. Yes.

Mr. LAWLER. How have Iran's proxy activities changed since the Biden Administration came into office and relaxed enforcement of sanctions. Has it gotten better?

Ms. LEDEEN. Far from it. They have become much more violent and aggressive. And they have caused many deaths and destruction across the region, yes.

Mr. ALTERMAN. Mr. Lawler, I think after the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force of the Islamic Republican Guard, many of these proxy groups have had more autonomy.

And I think the Iranians have enjoyed the fact that they have had less responsibility and less control and that in many ways they have reaped more benefits from the misbehavior of these groups, but they have less control over these groups than they had under Qasem Soleimani.

Mr. LAWLER. So is your argument that Soleimani should have been left alone?

Mr. ALTERMAN. My argument is that assassinating Qasem Soleimani has not ended the threat from the Iranian proxy groups. And in many ways, the way it has morphed—

Mr. LAWLER. Did you oppose his assassination?

Mr. ALTERMAN. Nobody asked—do I oppose it now? I am saying it did not have the desired effect because—

Mr. LAWLER. Well, it does not have the desired effect because this Administration has weakened its sanctions. When you allow oil revenues to increase \$80 billion, nearly 60 percent since this Administration took office, and these funds are being used to fund Hamas, to fund Hezbollah, to fund the Houthis, then, yes, you are right.

There is not a good consequence of that. But that has nothing to do with assassinating Soleimani. That has everything to do with this Administration's policy position to be weak on Iran. That is a policy choice that this Administration has made. And that is a function of relaxing sanctions on the sale of Iranian petroleum.

That is why I introduced the SHIP Act. China is the biggest purchaser of Iranian petroleum.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Chairman, you asked us to abide by 5 minutes.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Congressperson Lawler. So we need to proceed.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. WILSON. And I was trying to be respectful to the Congressman from Tennessee to get him back over here to sit quietly so he could ask his questions. And now I refer to the Congressperson from Tennessee Tim Burchett, the former mayor of Knoxville.

Mr. BURCHETT. Knox County. But it is a little bigger than Knoxville City, but still thank you. Thank you, Mr. Baird.

Ms. Ledeen—is it Ledeen or Layden? Ms.—

Ms. LEDEEN. Ledeen, yes.

Mr. BURCHETT. Ledeen, I'm sorry. Nobody gets my name right, either, ma'am. So we're good.

What have the recent strikes in Yemen achieved?

Ms. LEDEEN. There has been no demonstrable change since the strikes in Yemen.

Mr. BURCHETT. In your opinion, what needs to be targeted so that these strikes will be more effective and that we do not keep hitting the same dadgum targets?

Ms. LEDEEN. I think we can, as a benchmark, use the insurance prices and shipping companies' decisions to reroute around the Horn of Africa as a sort of guide for this.

But the recommendations that I have made in my oral and written testimony are really focused on empowering our partners and allies. But, yes, we should also be taking strikes against Houthi targets and IRGC targets that are training and equipping the Houthis as well.

And that is—we know where those are. And we should be taking more aggressive action not simply defensive actions.

Mr. BURCHETT. It seems to me also that we keep hitting the targets. I mean, we are not doing anything effective. Yes, we are showing them our capabilities. But to me, that does not—it is just a waste of resources.

Dr. Pollack, did I get that name right? All right. Good deal.

Mr. POLLACK. Yes. And talk about a name that gets mispronounced frequently. Well done.

Mr. BURCHETT. Yes, sir. Should we be concerned about any attempts to legitimize the Houthis as a government?

Mr. POLLACK. I think that we should. We need to recognize that this is not the government that the people of Yemen would choose if they ever had the opportunity to do so.

Mr. BURCHETT. Right.

Mr. POLLACK. I agree with Dr. Alterman that they represent, or they may represent a portion of the Yemeni population, but they do not come close to representing the majority of the people of Yemen.

Mr. BURCHETT. Do you feel like the Saudis would be willing to accept the Houthis de facto government in order to end their involvement in Yemen?

Mr. POLLACK. I think that what we have seen from the Saudis, especially since 2019, is that they probably would simply because they do not feel like they have any better alternative. But I think that they very much would regard it as their least bad option.

Mr. BURCHETT. OK. And I would like to ask this question, but maybe the rest of you all could answer it as well. Can you speak to the human rights abuses committed by the Houthi rebels?

Ms. LEDEEN. I can start. I can talk about their pervasive use of child soldiers. That is an absolute disgrace and—

Mr. BURCHETT. Did you say child tortures?

Ms. LEDEEN. Child soldiers.

Mr. BURCHETT. Soldiers, OK. I'm sorry. I did not hear that right.

Ms. LEDEEN. That is a heavily documented phenomenon that if you are not familiar, I sincerely recommend looking into it. It has been a problem for quite a while. And in the wake of these recent attacks, there has actually been a surge of people sending their children, you know, to join the Houthis.

And it is truly a humanitarian catastrophe when you consider the coming generation in Yemen and what they may be like, and what we might be dealing with, you know, in the next generation. They are already building that.

So I think that is one point. Obviously, there is a complete breakdown in medical care. There is pervasive starvation. My colleagues here can talk about that, I think, in further detail.

Mr. BURCHETT. Dr. Alterman?

Mr. ALTERMAN. There are issues of women's rights, LGBTQ rights as the gentleman from California talked about, basic rule of

law. This is government of thugs. It resembles in many ways a place run by organized crime. And the misery of the people of Yemen is pervasive and continues every day.

Mr. BURCHETT. All right. Women are just basically possessions, and gay folks are thrown off of buildings, that type of scenario, is that what you are telling me?

Mr. ALTERMAN. This is both a repressive government and a government that believes it is asserting traditional values, which is anathema to our understanding of individual freedoms and human rights.

Mr. BURCHETT. Dr. Pollack?

Mr. POLLACK. I will just add to that, Congressman. It is worth recognizing that the Zaidis are a very important old community of Yemen. Before 1962, it was a Zaidi Imamate that ruled Yemen.

But the Houthis are a fundamentalist element within the Zaidi community. And they are, again, oppressive, totalitarian in their behavior, fundamentalist in their outlook. And I do not think that we have a very good handle on even how many Zaidis support the Houthi rule.

I think that there is—I will put this as considerable anecdotal information that suggests that there are plenty of Zaidis who look at the Houthis and say these are not the people we would want telling us how to live our lives.

Mr. BURCHETT. OK. Thank you. I have gone over. I yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for your indulgence.

Mr. WILSON. Hear, hear. Thank you very much, Congressman Burchett, all the way from Knox County, Tennessee.

With this in mind, I would like to thank the witnesses for their valuable testimony and the members for their questions. The members of the subcommittee may have additional questions for the witnesses, and we will ask you to respond to these in writing.

Pursuant to committee rules, all the members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions and extraneous materials for the record, subject to length limitations.

And I would also like to thank the committee staff for their dedication and, again, this is bipartisan. Congressman Connolly and I frequently work on issues together, remarkably enough. And so we can work together with a very capable staff of the Foreign Affairs Committee and of the subcommittee. Without objection, the subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:25 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X



**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

**Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia  
Joe Wilson (R-SC), Chairman**

February 7, 2024

**TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held at 2:00 p.m. in room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

**DATE:** Wednesday, February 14, 2024

**TIME:** 2:00 p.m.

**LOCATION:** 2172 Rayburn

**SUBJECT:** Iran's Proxy in Yemen: The Houthi Threat to Middle East Stability, Global Shipping, and U.S. Servicemembers

**WITNESSES:** Ms. Simone Ledeen  
Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East  
U.S. Department of Defense

Dr. Kenneth Pollack  
Former CIA Analyst and NSC Director for the Persian Gulf

Dr. Jon Alterman  
Senior Vice President  
Center for Strategic and International Studies

\*NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

**By Direction of the Chairs**

*The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202 -226-8467 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.*



**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

Day Wednesday Date February 14th Room 2172

Starting Time 2:02 pm Ending Time 3:24 pm

Recesses ☐ (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ )

Presiding Member(s)

*Rep. Wilson*

*Check all of the following that apply:*

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☐

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☐

Stenographic Record ☐

TITLE OF HEARING:

*Iran's Proxy in Yemen: The Houthi Threat to Middle East Stability, Global Shipping, and U.S. Servicemembers*

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

*Rep. Burchett, Rep. Baird, Rep. Lawler, Rep. McCormick, Chairman McCaul, Rep. Sherman, Rep. Connolly, Rep. Manning, Rep. Schneider*

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

*(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)*

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE \_\_\_\_\_

OR

TIME ADJOURNED 3:24 pm

*Meg Wagner*  
Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

**Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
**Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia**

118<sup>th</sup> Congress

ATTENDANCE

Meeting on: Iran's Proxy in Yemen: The Houthi Threat to Middle East Stability,  
Global Shipping, and US Service Members

Date: 2/14/24

Convened: 2:02pm

Adjourned: 3:24pm

Representative	Present	Absent	Representative	Present	Absent
Mr. Wilson (SC-02)	X		Mr. Phillips (MN-03)		
Mr. Mast (FL-18)			Mr. Sherman (CA-30)	X	
Mr. Burchett (TN-02)	X		Mr. Connolly (VA-11)	X	
Mr. Jackson (TX-13)			Mrs. Manning (NC-06)	X	
Mr. Baird (IN-04)	X		Mr. Amo (RI-01)		
Mr. Lawler (NY-17)	X		Mr. Schneider	X	
Mr. McCormick (GA-6)	X				
Chairman McCaul	X				

## RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

1

**Questions for the Record: February 14, 2024, House Foreign Affairs Committee,  
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia Hearing on “Examining  
the Biden Administration’s Afghanistan Policy Since the U.S. Withdrawal: Part II”  
Chairman Wilson for Simone Ledeen**

**Question 1:**

Would you call the Houthis a proxy of Iran, why or why not?

**Answer:**

*Yes, the Houthis are a proxy of Iran due to the extensive military and financial support they receive from the rogue nation. By supporting the Houthis, Iran not only gains a strategic foothold in Yemen but also extends its capacity to influence maritime security in the Red Sea, a critical juncture for international shipping and oil transport. This augmentation of Houthi capabilities serves Tehran's broader objectives of exerting pressure on regional adversaries, and showcasing its ability to impact one of the world's most crucial maritime chokepoints. The strategic significance of the Red Sea for global trade, especially for oil shipments, underscore the broader regional implications of Iran's support for the Houthis. This dynamic represents a calculated extension of Tehran's influence, leveraging relatively minimal investments in the Houthis to achieve outsized effects on regional security dynamics and international economic interests. The Houthi actions in the Red Sea, facilitated by Iranian support, embody a critical component of Iran's strategy to challenge its rivals and assert its power beyond its borders, holding at risk the safety and security of vital maritime routes. The missile and drone attacks attributed to the Houthis, including attempts to strike critical Saudi oil infrastructure, underscore the strategic implications of Iranian support, elevating the conflict to a regional dimension that extends Iran's influence and serves its interests against regional rivals.*

*Iran's support is not limited to material assistance; it also extends to training and operational planning, enhancing the Houthis' military effectiveness and organizational capabilities. Iran's support for the Houthis is widely reported to include not only military hardware, training, and technological assistance but also financial backing. This financial support is crucial for the Houthis, enabling them to sustain their operations, procure weapons, and maintain their governance structures in the territories they control. The strategic implication of these activities is significant. The Houthis' actions in the Red Sea highlight the group's role as a key player in Iran's regional strategy, directly challenging US interests and those of our partners and allies.*

**Question 2:**

What more would we like to see from our European friends and partners on the Houthi threat?

**Answer:**

*Addressing the Houthi threat requires stronger, concerted action from our European friends and partners. Here are the specific measures that would significantly contribute to addressing this challenge:*

- Enforce Sanctions: It's crucial for European countries to rigorously enforce international sanctions against the Houthi rebels and their Iranian regime supporters, specifically in the IRGC and the MOIS. This includes preventing the flow of funds, weapons, and other resources that enable their activities.
- Proscribe the IRGC: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has been a key supporter of the Houthis. Designating the IRGC as a terrorist organization by European nations would limit their operational capabilities and send a strong signal about Europe's stance against entities that undermine international security.
- Restrict Travel and Transshipment: Implementing stringent controls on travel and transshipment of individuals through European territories can disrupt Iranian support to the Houthis. This would include monitoring and controlling cargo to ensure that it does not contain military aid destined for the Houthis.
- Eject Intelligence Officers: Expelling Iranian intelligence officers from European countries would disrupt their networks and hinder their ability to operate effectively abroad.
- Seize Assets and Ban Officials: Freezing assets and imposing travel bans on Iranian officials known to support the Houthis can directly impact their operational capabilities. This measure would target those within Iran and Yemen and in other countries, affecting their ability to coordinate and finance Houthi activities.

**Question 3:**

What does the material support Iran has provided to the Houthis, and indeed continues to provide them with, indicate about their intentions for these groups?

**Answer:**

*Iran's support for the Houthis highlights the regime's strategic intent to expand its influence across the Middle East through a network of terrorist organizations, often referred to as the "Axis of Resistance". Iran uses this network to challenge Western influence and project Iranian power. By providing military, financial, and other types of support to these actors, Iran crafts a multi-front challenge against its adversaries while attempting to maintain plausible deniability. This strategy reflects a comprehensive approach to reshape the geopolitical landscape in favor of Iran's strategic interests and to counter Western- particularly U.S. and Israeli- influence.*

*Iran's support for these groups is a direct challenge to Western interests and allies in the region. For instance, Hezbollah's military capabilities pose a constant threat to Israel, while the Houthis' control over parts of Yemen, including key maritime routes, challenges not only Saudi Arabia but also the security of international shipping lanes and the global economy. By strengthening these groups, Iran seeks to deter Western intervention in the region and diminish the influence of Western-aligned governments.*

*Iran's regional objectives include consolidating its role as a dominant regional power, ensuring the survival of friendly regimes, and increasing its leverage in international negotiations, particularly concerning its nuclear program and sanctions relief. The network of proxies serves these goals by creating a buffer zone of allied or friendly territories, deterring attacks on Iran, and providing leverage through unconventional means.*

*A key benefit to Iran of leveraging proxy groups is the ability to conduct operations that advance Iranian interests without the operations being directly traceable back to Tehran. This has allowed Iran to avoid the diplomatic and military repercussions that would follow from overt aggression. Using proxies in executing missile and drone attacks, cyber warfare, and even direct confrontations with adversaries, has enabled Iran to maintain a degree of deniability, although its fingerprints abound.*

*Iran's strategy of supporting the Houthis and other non-state actors across the Middle East reflects a sophisticated approach to regional power dynamics. It seeks to challenge Western influence and assert its own, using a combination of ideological affinity, military support, and political alignment with groups that can act as both spearheads and shields for the regime's hegemonic ambitions in the region. This approach has significant implications for the stability of the Middle East, the security of international trade routes, and the global geopolitical balance, highlighting the need for immediate and decisive action before it's too late.*

**Question 4:**

What role can sanctions play in helping degrade Houthi capabilities or punish the Houthis for their deepening ties to Tehran?

**Answer:**

*It's important to note up front that the effectiveness of sanctions depends on their design, implementation, and the level of international cooperation in enforcing them. That said, sanctions can play a significant role in degrading Houthi capabilities and punishing them for their deepening ties to Tehran by targeting various aspects of their operational and logistical framework, as well as their financial networks.*

*Sanctions can target individuals, organizations, and governments that provide financial support to the Houthis. By freezing assets and blocking access to the global financial system, sanctions can severely limit the Houthis' ability to fund their operations. This includes direct funding from Tehran, which has been a crucial support line for the Houthis. Sanctions against Houthi leaders and key figures can disrupt their command structure and weaken their operational capacity. By imposing travel bans and asset freezes on these individuals, sanctions can also deter others from assuming leadership roles or cooperating with the Houthi movement.*

*Arms embargoes and targeted sanctions against entities involved in the supply chain of weapons to the Houthis can help curb their military capabilities. This includes targeting the procurement networks that operate between Iran and the Houthis, which are essential for the transfer of sophisticated weapons and technology. In 2015, the UN imposed restrictions on Iran's ability to buy and sell conventional weapons and ballistic missile technology. These restrictions were*

*designed to curb Iran's missile program and limit its ability to proliferate weapons to non-state actors, including the Houthis. Unfortunately this embargo was lifted in October 2020, enabling Iran to legally engage in arms transfers, including to proxy groups like the Houthis.*

**Question 5:**

What other targets should the U.S. and the UK be hitting in Yemen to degrade Houthi capabilities?

**Answer:**

*To effectively deter the Iranian-backed Houthi aggression and restore freedom of navigation, the United States and its partners must carry out a sustained military campaign in Yemen and the broader region against Houthi leadership, arms depots, and key infrastructure, in addition to more broad military activities against Iranian logistical networks and communication systems in the region.*

*This campaign must include targets such as the Behshad and the MV Saviz. The Behshad is an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) spy ship stationed in the Red Sea for an extended period, providing logistical and intelligence support to the Houthis. The MV Saviz has been stationed in the Red Sea near the coast of Eritrea, close to Yemen, for several years. Officially registered as a cargo ship owned by the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, the Saviz is widely believed to serve as a reconnaissance ship and IRGC base. It is equipped with signals intelligence capabilities and has been supporting the Houthis' destabilizing activities.*

*The campaign I describe would not only curb Iran's ability to project power and supply the Houthis but would also serve to protect vital international shipping lanes.*

**Question 6:**

Should the Houthis be put back on the FTO list, or is an SDGT listing sufficient in your eyes, why or why not?

**Answer:**

*Yes, the Houthis should be returned to the FTO list. While the Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) designation imposes significant financial sanctions and restrictions on targeted individuals and entities, it falls short of addressing the full spectrum of concerns associated with groups like the Houthis. Specifically, the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation carries additional, critical measures, such as making it a criminal offense to knowingly provide material support or resources to the designated group, and imposes specific immigration restrictions that prevent members or representatives of an FTO from entering or remaining in the United States. The FTO designation not only enhances legal and financial constraints but also elevates the diplomatic and symbolic stance against designated entities. By applying the FTO designation to the Houthis, the U.S. would signal a stronger condemnation of their actions, restrict their international movement more effectively, and limit their operational capabilities by criminalizing support from individuals and entities under U.S. jurisdiction. Thus, while SDGT is a powerful tool for combating terrorism financing and supporting networks, the*

*comprehensive nature of the FTO designation is necessary to address the multifaceted threat posed by the Houthis, encompassing legal, financial, and immigration-related measures beyond the SDGT designation.*

**Question 7:**

Is there such a thing as a military solution to the crisis in the Red Sea/Yemen today?

**Answer:**

*The crisis in the Red Sea represents a significant military problem that necessitates a military solution, to ensure the security of one of the world's most vital maritime corridors. This perspective is grounded in the understanding that the safety and freedom of navigation in international waters are paramount for global trade and energy supplies, and threats to these principles must be addressed decisively.*

*The Red Sea is a critical artery for global commerce, particularly for the transport of oil from the Middle East to Europe and beyond. The security of this maritime route is not only a regional concern but also a matter of international economic stability. The repeated attacks by the Houthis, including targeting commercial vessels and threatening maritime traffic, underscore the military nature of the problem, as these actions directly challenge the principles of freedom of navigation and safe passage in international waters.*

*The Iranian-backed Houthis have demonstrated the capability and willingness to use sophisticated military tactics and technologies, such as drones, missiles and mines to target maritime assets. This threat necessitates a corresponding military response to neutralize the capability of the Houthis to launch such attacks, protect civilian maritime traffic, and uphold international law regarding the safety of the seas.*

*Addressing the crisis effectively includes regional cooperation as well as the support of international partners as it is our collective responsibility to safeguard key international maritime routes against threats.*

**Question 8:**

What are the right messages we should be sending to our partners in Saudi Arabia on this threat?

**Answer:**

*In dialogues with Saudi Arabia regarding the threats in the Red Sea, it's imperative for our political leaders to recognize a fundamental reality: a meaningful shift in the Saudis' stance is likely contingent upon a significant change in U.S. policy towards Iran. Acknowledging the depth of the challenge, the conversation must extend beyond near-term security issues to address the overarching concern of Iranian regional hegemony. Moreover, it's essential to understand that the Houthis' actions disrupting global commerce, and killing sailors are integral to Iran's strategy to widen its influence and undermine regional stability. This perspective underlines the necessity for a strategic reassessment of U.S. policy on Iran as a critical step in aligning more closely with Saudi concerns and fortifying our partnership against common threats.*

**Question 9:**

Why in your view, was France not a member of the international maritime security coalition in the Red Sea called prosperity Guardian, and why were local countries with Red Sea borders like Egypt and Saudi Arabia also not a part of this coalition?

**Answer:**

*The absence of France, along with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, from the international maritime security coalition "Prosperity Guardian" in the Red Sea can in large measure be attributed to their perception of the United States' willingness to engage in meaningful, offensive kinetic operations against the Houthis and their Iranian sponsors. These nations likely assess that without a credible threat of offensive action to restore deterrence, participation in such a coalition might not enhance their security but rather could increase their risk of being targeted for retaliation.*

*France, with its significant military capabilities and strategic interests in the region, along with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which both have substantial stakes in Red Sea security, might view the commitment to a coalition that lacks a decisive offensive posture as insufficient to counter the threats effectively. This assessment is rooted in the broader geopolitical dynamics and the history of engagements in the region.*

*Their hesitance to join "Prosperity Guardian" may also reflect concerns about the coalition's strategic direction and operational effectiveness, given the complexities of maritime security in the Red Sea. The potential for escalation without a clear path to meaningful military action against principal adversaries could leave these nations exposed to increased, rather than decreased, security threats.*

*In essence, the calculation by France, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia not to participate in the coalition likely stems from a pragmatic assessment of the balance between the potential benefits of such an alliance and the risks of increased vulnerability without a guarantee of robust, proactive measures against the primary sources of regional instability.*



**Questions for the Record: February 14, 2024, House Foreign Affairs Committee,  
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia Hearing on “Examining  
the Biden Administration’s Afghanistan Policy Since the U.S. Withdrawal: Part II”  
Chairman Wilson for Kenneth Pollack**

**Question 1:**

Would you call the Houthis a proxy of Iran, why or why not?

**Answer:**

*I would not. A proxy refers to a group ultimately controlled by another entity. To the best of our understanding, the Houthis are not “controlled” by Iran. They are an independent group that is allied with Iran, receives substantial assistance from Iran, and is heavily influenced by Iran. The distinction is important because, as I observed in my written testimony, it is extremely unclear whether Iran could force the Houthis to do something that they really did not want to do. It why I am skeptical that even a powerful American campaign aimed at Iran (something I think justified for other reasons) would cause the Houthis to cease their attacks on Red Sea shipping. In that case, while the Iranians get a great deal from the Houthi attacks—and are unquestionably encouraging and enabling those attacks—the Houthis themselves are getting so much from those attacks that I am dubious that the Houthis would cease them simply because Iran wanted them to do so. It is why I believe we must devise an effective strategy to convince the Houthis to end these attacks, separate and apart from whatever strategy we may choose to employ against Iran.*

**Question 2:**

What more would we like to see from our European friends and partners on the Houthi threat?

**Answer:**

*It would certainly be helpful if the Europeans were to provide ships and aircraft for Operation Prosperity Guardian. It would be ideal if they too levied sanctions against the Houthis. And of greatest importance, if the United States were to begin providing military assistance to the government of Yemen—as I recommended in both my verbal and written testimony, as well as elsewhere—they join us in that effort in all ways.*

**Question 3:**

What does the material support Iran has provided to the Houthis, and indeed continues to provide them with, indicate about their intentions for these groups?

**Answer:**

*Iran’s support for the Houthis is one element in its sophisticated and, unfortunately, effective strategy to drive the United States from the Middle East, overturn the governments of our regional allies, destroy the state of Israel, and make themselves the regional hegemon. First, Iran sees great benefit in chaos, mayhem, and violence. Because we and our allies are status quo powers, it threatens our interests and creates opportunities for them to weaken or overthrow the governments of our regional allies. It taxes our resources, engendering popular unhappiness*

*with the U.S. role. For these reasons, Iran will encourage and assist virtually any actor—state or non-state—seeking to overturn the regional status quo by violence, and the Houthis very much fit that bill.*

*Moreover, in the specific case of the Houthis, their geographic location on the Bab el-Mandeb has always been of particular interest to Iran specifically because of their ability to threaten a significant portion of global shipping. As we are seeing, this gives them the potential ability to hold international commerce hostage, something Iran already attempts with its threats to the Strait of Hormuz. Having the Houthis demonstrate an ability to close off the Bab el-Mandeb reinforces Iran's desire to demonstrate the power and influence of its Axis of Resistance, both to seek additional recruits and (so they hope) to force regional governments to accede to their wishes.*

**Question 4:**

What role can sanctions play in helping degrade Houthi capabilities or punish the Houthis for their deepening ties to Tehran?

**Answer:**

*While I would not suggest that sanctions are meaningless, but their role is likely to be limited. They certainly demonstrate American, and hopefully international, opposition to what the Houthis and Iranians are doing. For that reason, it would be a grave mistake to lift or relax those already applied, or simply to fail to impose new ones. The Houthis, the Iranians, their allies, and other actors who might be tempted to join them must understand that the international community stands against them, and is willing to sacrifice economic interests to cause them pain, even if that pain is unlikely to be enough to compel them to desist on their own. The demonstration of international opinion and will is extremely important in its own right.*

*Beyond this, however, we should not count on sanctions to achieve our objectives with the Houthis. First, Yemen is a desperately poor nation and it is unlikely that sanctions would have much of an impact on its circumstances, especially since any sanctions would not halt the international aid that comprises so much of Yemen's subsistence economy. Second, as I noted in both my verbal and written testimony, the Houthis are getting a tremendous amount from their attacks on shipping. Overnight, they have ended their isolation in the Arab and Islamic worlds. They have changed the conversation within Yemen away from their mismanagement of the northern economy, repressive and incompetent governance, and military stalemate. And they have allowed the Houthis to claim that they are a power of global influence, fighting against both America and Israel, able to hold the global economy for ransom. To the Houthis, those gains are enormous and almost certainly would outweigh any of the modest pain they might suffer from American or even comprehensive international sanctions.*

**Question 5:**

What other targets should the U.S. and the UK be hitting in Yemen to degrade Houthi capabilities?

**Answer:**

*Once again, I believe that the most effective American strategy is to provide military assistance to the government of Yemen, to enable them to defeat the Houthis, drive them out of Sanaa and the other lands they occupied since 2004, and force them to agree to end their military campaigns and become part of a new Yemeni government in which their authority and economic stakes would be no greater than their demographic weight.*

*That said, if the United States prefers to shift to a coercive air campaign to try to convince the Houthis to halt their attacks on Red Sea shipping, then it is going to have to shift to striking targets of value to the Houthis, rather than merely defending against the Houthi attacks themselves (including by preemptively striking Houthi anti-shipping assets before they can be launched). One cannot coerce simply by playing defense.*

*The most obvious target sets that the United States should consider are twofold. First, the U.S. could strike other Houthi military targets, those critical to its ground operations, and thus to its ability to take territory and hold it. Unfortunately, the Houthis don't have a great deal of that, and what they do have tends to be cheap. Nevertheless, the U.S. could take out Houthi tanks, artillery, multiple rocket launchers, and other large pieces of equipment. Second, the United States could strike Houthi leadership targets directly. This would require considerable intelligence, but as we have demonstrated from bin Ladin to Qasim Sulaymani, we can identify and eliminate senior adversary officials, even those who move and operate with extreme secrecy. If we are able to do so, that might cause the Houthis to rethink their attacks on Red Sea shipping.*

**Question 6:**

Should the Houthis be put back on the FTO list, or is an SDGT listing sufficient in your eyes, why or why not?

**Answer:**

*I suspect that the Biden Administration sees putting the Houthis back on the FTO list as an escalation and are probably hoping that the threat they will do so will have an impact on Houthi decision-making. I see that as a reasonable, albeit highly unlikely, gambit. If it fails, and the Houthis persist in these attacks I would favor all manner of sanctions either via the vehicle of the FTO list or other justifications, as I described above.*

**Question 7:**

Is there such a thing as a military solution to the crisis in the Red Sea/Yemen today?

**Answer:**

*Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that diplomacy and/or sanctions alone have close to zero chance of achieving our goals with them. It is exceptionally unlikely that the Houthis are going to halt their attacks unless they suffer terrible military defeats. Indeed, as I have noted above, I am skeptical even that the kind of pain we might inflict on them with more punishing airstrikes may not be enough.*

*It is for that reason that I am advocating a strategy that would be almost purely military: arming, equipping, and assisting the internationally-recognized government of Yemen to defeat the Houthis and regain control of the country. That would represent a total military defeat for the Houthis, and it is, I believe certainly the best way to address the threat posed by the Houthis, and through them, by Iran.*

*All that said, we should recognize that if we do not adopt the strategy that I and others are advocating, any of the other alternatives will make us more reliant on diplomacy. Even a more powerful air campaign than we are currently mounting, even one that were expanded to include other Houthi military assets or Houthi leadership targets, would still be a strategy of coercion. The danger here is that a strategy of coercion relies on some element of diplomacy to negotiate an end to the situation, and it gives the target the initiative. The target gets to decide when they have taken too much pain, when the benefits they are accruing are outweighed by the costs they are bearing. As I have noted, both because of what the Houthis are getting and who they are, I think it will be very difficult to successfully coerce them. It is why I believe military victory is a much safer strategy in this case.*

**Question 8:**

What are the right messages we should be sending to our partners in Saudi Arabia on this threat?

**Answer:**

*Our Saudi and Emirati allies are experiencing a bit of schadenfreude mixed with frustration at this point. They warned us in 2014 that the Houthis were reckless, aggressive, and dangerous, and they urged us to back them more fully in their effort to prevent the Houthis from taking over Yemen. Our assistance was half-hearted at best. We did not protect them when Iran retaliated against them in the summer and fall of 2019. And our criticism and pressure on them was instrumental in convincing them to withdraw from Yemen at that time—a time when the Emirati ground campaign was on the brink of cracking Houthi ground military power.*

*Now that we have learned just how dangerous the Houthis are and find ourselves having to take military action against them, we have a lot of work to do with our Saudi and Emirati allies. We are going to have to convince them that we do finally understand the severity of the threat. We are going to have to convince them that we will protect them if they are willing to help us in Yemen and Iran against retaliates against them. And we are going to have to convince them that whatever we do in Yemen will result in a permanent solution to the Houthi problem, not a quick fix that will allow the Houthis to recover and resume their campaign to take over the entire country. That final point is, once again, a critical reason why I believe the United States should support the government of Yemen. That is the only way that the problem of the Houthis can be solved, not merely masked temporarily.*

**Question 9:**

Why in your view, was France not a member of the international maritime security coalition in the Red Sea called prosperity Guardian, and why were local countries with Red Sea borders like Egypt and Saudi Arabia also not a part of this coalition?

**Answer:**

*I am not an expert on France. I can only say that from my time as an official in the U.S. government, I found the government of France to be utterly cynical, feckless, and duplicitous. From my perspective, their behavior in this instance is entirely consistent with my experiences with them on other Middle Eastern matters during the 1990s.*

**Questions for the Record: February 14, 2024, House Foreign Affairs Committee,  
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia Hearing on “Iran’s  
Proxy in Yemen: The Houthi Threat to Middle East Stability, Global Shipping, and U.S.  
Servicemembers”**

**Chairman Wilson for Jon Alterman**

**Question 1:**

Would you call the Houthis a proxy of Iran, why or why not?

**Answer:**

You could, but it may be more accurate to call them clients of Iran. Iran provides material support for the Houthis in the form of arms, training, and funding. Iran supports the Houthis with the expectation that its patronage will further Iran’s regional foreign policy interests, and so far, it has. The Saudis’ war against the Houthis has damaged Saudi Arabia’s international reputation and persuaded the Saudis that they need to engage more directly with Iran. Similarly, the Houthis threaten to draw the United States into a costly confrontation in the Red Sea that the United States may not clearly win.

But the Houthis also differ in important ways from the other forces in Iran’s “Axis of Resistance,” and it’s my assessment that the Iranians have influence—but not control—over their actions. There are several things at play here. First, the Iranians have invested only a fraction in the Houthis that they have invested in groups like Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces, and they consider the Houthis expendable. That conclusion is understood on both sides. Second, the Houthi movement has a long political and military history that predates its intimate relationship with Iran. Third, the Iranians lack an easy supply route to the Houthis like they have to many of their proxy groups, leading to less mutual reliance.

The Houthis’ interests coincide with many of Iran’s at this point, but I don’t believe Iran can dictate the Houthis’ actions as much as they can for several other groups they support. The Iranians seem very comfortable with a looser arrangement, and they still seem to find the Houthis provide good value for the money Iran spends on them, which appears to be on the order of about \$100 million/year.

**Question 2:**

What more would we like to see from our European friends and partners on the Houthi threat?

**Answer:**

Some of our European friends and partners are fully engaged with us, especially the British. But I worry that some others hope that the mere presence of their forces will be enough to deter the Houthis. I don’t think that’s the case.

There does seem to be significant reluctance to join the United States in a military task force. I’ve reached out to the French, and they tell me that they have a ship that is part of Operation

Prosperity Guardian but the French decline to be under U.S. command. The same French ship is also part of a six-ship EU mission called “Aspides” under Greek command that seeks to preserve freedom of navigation, as well as Combined Task Force 153, a two-year-old U.S.-led multilateral effort intended to advance Red Sea security. The EU asserts that Aspides will not take part in any military strikes and will only operate at sea. The French embassy has told me that when the United States wants French support in its Red Sea operations, it puts the request through the commander of Operation Aspides, who then communicates the request to the French.

Despite their desire to avoid combat, the European missions have had to act militarily. The French have fired on Houthi projectiles twice, and on March 2, the Italian destroyer *Caio Duilio* shot down a Houthi drone that was headed toward the ship—the first time the Italian Navy has engaged against an aerial threat since World War II.

While the UK has operated jointly with U.S. forces, most European countries seem to want to dissociate themselves from U.S. military action. I am afraid that there is no way to persuade the Houthis to change their behavior without a military component, although I completely agree there needs to be a diplomatic one, too. As Europe benefits from Red Sea navigation far more than the United States, it seems appropriate to me that European states act in closer partnership with the United States than I have seen up to this point.

**Question 3:**

What does the material support Iran has provided to the Houthis, and indeed continues to provide them with, indicate about their intentions for these groups?

**Answer:**

Iran began to provide quite modest support for the Houthis going back to 2009, but the assistance took a serious uptick in 2017 or so, after the Houthis demonstrated their fighting ability against both the Saudis and the Emiratis. That being said, this support is relatively nominal for both sides. Most of the Houthis’ weaponry is domestic. For Iran, the cost of support to the Houthis is minimal compared to its overall defense budget and the amount it provides other groups in the region. Iran’s ultimate aim with this material support is to increase Iran’s regional leverage at low cost.

**Question 4:**

What role can sanctions play in helping degrade Houthi capabilities or punish the Houthis for their deepening ties to Tehran?

**Answer:**

I am not confident that sanctions can play a large role in shaping Houthi decision making. We can certainly impose sanctions on Houthi leaders and financiers, but I am not aware of major Houthi financial interests that we can hold at risk. It would not surprise me if some of the most consequential help the Iranians are giving the Houthis is assistance evading U.S. sanctions.

The other challenge of sanctions is how to impose penalties without harming Yemeni civilians who live under Houthi rule. The Houthis are a pervasive force in the lives of about 75 percent of Yemenis, and they control checkpoints, warehouses, utilities, and other assets that affect Yemenis' daily lives. The UN estimates that more than 18 million Yemenis (out of a population of 34 million) need humanitarian assistance and protection, and 2.4 million children are likely to face acute malnutrition. While I fully support actions that undermine Houthi efforts to skim off humanitarian relief to Yemenis, I'd be concerned that draconian efforts to do so could hurt ordinary Yemenis, many of whom are already imperiled, and leave the Houthis untouched or even enriched as they gain even more control over relief shipments.

**Question 5:**

What other targets should the U.S. and the UK be hitting in Yemen to degrade Houthi capabilities?

**Answer:**

I support efforts to degrade Houthi capabilities and strike Houthi stockpiles. Yet, the Houthi attacks are overwhelmingly a political decision, and we need to be using diplomatic engagement with the Houthis, the internationally recognized government of Yemen, Yemen's neighbors, and others to stop them. I am confident that military strikes alone will both strengthen their resolve and strengthen their grip on Yemen.

**Question 6:**

Should the Houthis be put back on the FTO list, or is an SDGT listing sufficient in your eyes, why or why not?

**Answer:**

In my judgment, the designation of the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) group is the correct step at the current time. The designation imposes penalties on the Houthis while also making clear that harsher penalties could be forthcoming. At this point, it allows humanitarian organizations greater freedom to operate without the fear that any contact with the Houthis—who after all, are the prevailing authorities in much of the country—will result in crippling U.S. penalties. Putting the Houthis back on the foreign terrorist organization (FTO) list could inhibit the delivery of aid in Yemen's ongoing humanitarian crisis without providing proportionate strategic benefit to the United States. If the Houthis are put back on the FTO list, it should only be after extensive consultations to ensure that essential humanitarian assistance can still flow into the country and thousands of Yemenis do not die as a direct consequence of U.S. action.

**Question 7:**

Is there such a thing as a military solution to the crisis in the Red Sea/Yemen today?



**Answer:**

This conflict is fundamentally a political issue for which we need to use military instruments as part of our broader toolkit, rather than a military problem with military solutions. No one doubts the strength of U.S. military capabilities, but I do doubt their adequacy for this problem. To reach a solution, we must use all tools in our arsenal to compel our adversaries to change their behavior, including a variety of tools of statecraft: diplomacy, trade, economic engagement, and others. There is a danger that U.S. military efforts could actually help the Houthis present themselves as the fiercest and most resilient fighters in the region and grow their domestic support. I also worry that the Houthis will seek to draw the U.S. military into an extended and expensive regional engagement with no clear guardrails or endpoints, to the benefit of Iran and the dismay of the American public.

**Question 8:**

What are the right messages we should be sending to our partners in Saudi Arabia on this threat?

**Answer:**

The Saudis have been fighting the Houthis off and on for a decade and a half, and more than one thousand Saudis have died as a result. They don't need to be persuaded that the Houthis are a threat. Instead, they need to be persuaded that we have a strategy to end the Houthi threat to shipping and promote a settlement to the conflict in Yemen, and they should be our close partners in those efforts.

**Question 9:**

Why in your view, was France not a member of the international maritime security coalition in the Red Sea called prosperity Guardian, and why were local countries with Red Sea borders like Egypt and Saudi Arabia also not a part of this coalition?

**Answer:**

The Pentagon says that approximately 20 countries are members of Operation Prosperity Guardian, but about half of them are anonymous. As a consequence, it is hard to judge exactly who is in the coalition and who is not. As I noted above, the French seem to have an especially wary relationship to the effort.

Still, there are a web of joint operations and task forces that profess commitment to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. The Egyptians, for example, have told me they are active members of Combined Task Force 153, they provide intelligence support and personnel to joint operations, and they provide preferential logistics support to the task force. An Egyptian government official told me his government does not understand why Prosperity Guardian is necessary as a separate exercise since CTF 153 is already active.

In addition to Operation Prosperity Guardian, the United States leads a separate coalition that has launched strikes on Houthi assets and launch sites. The UK is clearly a member of this coalition, but it is unclear who else is.

There is clear reluctance to be too closely associated with the United States, given the U.S. willingness to attack Houthi assets. Yet, both French and Italian warships have had to shoot down projectiles headed their way.

While I understand the desire for military operations without engaging in kinetic action, I doubt that the current environment in the Red Sea allows for that.

**Questions for the Record from Rep. Dean Phillips (D-MN):**

MENACA Subcommittee Hearing

“Iran’s Proxy in Yemen: The Houthi Threat to Middle East Stability, Global Shipping, and U.S. Servicemembers”

February 14, 2024

**Question for Dr. Jon Alterman:**

**Question:**

- Do you agree with the proposition that the United States has not derived the desired benefit from the assassination of Qassem Soleimani because the Biden administration has a policy of being weak on Iran?

**Answer:**

I completely agree with the proposition that the assassination of Qassem Soleimani has not provided the desired benefit to the United States. There are several reasons why this is so.

First, the Soleimani assassination has not persuaded the Iranians to curtail their support of supporting proxy militias that seek to torment U.S. allies and partners and give Iran leverage throughout the Middle East. Instead, what the Iranians have done under Soleimani’s successor, Esmail Qaani, is to give these groups greater autonomy. This has made them more lethal in many ways, and it has given the Iranians a greater degree of deniability.

Second, the Soleimani assassination, combined with a U.S. strategy of “maximum pressure,” persuaded many Iranian government officials that there is no advantage to be found in trying to meet U.S. demands. It convinced the Iranians that the United States was unalterably hostile to Iran, and that the United States would take any Iranian concession not as a sign of good faith but as a sign of weakness that had to be resisted at all costs.

Third, the assassination helped isolate the United States on issues related to Iran. What had been broad efforts with wide international backing became narrow ones that the U.S. supported along, and U.S. adversaries have actively sought to use Iranian defiance to undermine the United States.

I assess that part of our problem is we are bad at measuring the success of our efforts to change Iranian behavior. I readily admit that Iran is likely to do things I find offensive for many years to come. That’s not to say, though, that some patterns of behavior are less offensive than others, and persuading Iran to do fewer offensive or threatening things represents an improvement. When we don’t recognize those improvements, sometimes we push Iran to double down on its offensive behavior, either because the Iranians think they have nothing to lose or because it reinforces their belief that our hostility is unchangeable. Of course, officials we are most concerned with in Iran often have businesses that are intimately connected to skirting the sanctions we impose. Therefore, many of them have an economic incentive to ensure we keep trying to punish them.

More broadly, it seems to me that we keep trying to “fix” Iran, adopting a flurry of policies that all fall short of their goals. Meanwhile, the Iranians consider their mere survival a victory, and they’ve been winning that victory ever day for 45 years. I am not confident that any policy can “fix” Iran, nor that there is any U.S. strategy that can collapse the government and have it replaced by something better.

None of this is about making life easier for a government whose actions I find abhorrent. The Iranians have imprisoned several of my friends—all U.S. citizens—on trumped-up charges, they have supported proxy groups that have killed thousands, and they have immiserated a great country of 90 million, depriving them of both hope and prosperity.

I assess that this is a weak government with diminishing support. We should let that process take its course, while making clear that Iranian behavior will shape how the United States and its partners and allies engage with Iran. I am hopeful but not certain that we can create a virtuous cycle. Even if we cannot, I hope we can create a sustainable policy toward Iran that enjoys U.S. public support, does not draw us into open-ended Middle Eastern military engagements, and leaves us—rather than our adversaries—controlling the pace of relations.

The policy I’ve described is not about being “weak on Iran,” and it’s broadly consistent with the one the Biden administration has pursued. A key part of deterrence is “assurance”—that is, the target state needs to have confidence that if they act in desirable ways, they will be rewarded (or at least, not punished further). A strategy of promoting unrelenting pressure on Iran is unlikely to collapse the government, is likely to elicit even worse behavior from the Iranians because they don’t believe their actions make any difference, and will prompt them to do anything they can to show their defiance. Much of Iranian government confidence now derives from having survived a hostile president who proclaimed a strategy of “maximum pressure.” There are many in the Iranian power structure who would welcome more overt hostility from the United States because they think it will actually make them more secure. In my judgment, that pathway is a mistake. If the United States is not willing to vary the pressure on Iran based on Iranian actions, it undermines deterring the Islamic Republic, which is not in the United States’ interests.