

Israel and Houthis in Yemen: Attacks Highlight Regional Conflict Risks

July 22, 2024

On July 19, 2024, the *Ansar Allah*/Houthi movement, an Iran-backed force that controls parts of [Yemen](#), attacked Tel Aviv, Israel (see **Figure 1**) using an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The Israeli government [reported](#) that the attack killed one Israeli citizen near the U.S. Embassy Branch Office and wounded eight others, and marked the first Israeli death amid the over 200 Houthi missile and UAV attacks the Israeli government has [reported](#) since October 2023. Houthi leaders have [stated](#) they will continue attacks against Israel until Israel ends its operations in Gaza.

On July 20, Israel launched [Operation Long Arm](#), in which combat/refueling aircraft flew more than 1,000 miles from their bases in Israel to strike the Houthi-held port of Hudaydah (alt. Hodeidah, see **Figure 1**). The operation, which Israel [characterized](#) as a retaliatory strike, hit fuel depots, a refinery and power station, and dockside cranes, [reportedly](#) killing a number of people and wounding dozens. Hudaydah is an [important](#) commercial port, and damage to its infrastructure may limit flows of goods, food, humanitarian supplies, and [fuel](#) until functions are restored. Economic and humanitarian impact estimates may follow more complete damage assessments. A statement by the U.N. Secretary General [noted](#) “considerable damage to civilian infrastructure” and urged “all to exercise utmost restraint.” The Houthis have targeted Israel with missiles [since](#) the July 20 Israeli air strikes, elevating concerns about the possibility of a regional war.

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Figure I. Map of Red Sea Region

Source: CRS, using noted resources.

U.S. Policy vis-à-vis Yemen and the Houthis

The July 19 Houthi attack on Israel and Israel's counterstrike occurred amidst [debate](#) over the direction and effectiveness of U.S. policy toward the Houthis. The Biden Administration has pursued the de-

escalation of Yemen's long-running civil war and worked to preserve a fragile ceasefire reached in 2022 while [condemning](#) and responding militarily to Houthi attacks since October 2023.

U.S. Navy and partner forces positioned in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden have intercepted Houthi UAVs, missiles, and uncrewed surface craft and are conducting maritime security operations through the multinational, U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and some U.S. partners also have [targeted](#) Houthi military [sites](#) to "[disrupt and degrade](#)" Houthi capabilities. In May 2024, the CENTCOM Commander [called](#) for a greater multilateral effort to stop Iran's weapons shipments. [Broadening](#) Houthi attacks have prompted some calls for more [expansive](#) action against them. Others have warned that the Houthis may [benefit](#) from confrontation with the United States and Israel to the extent it raises their profile and enables them to tighten their local control.

Houthi control over parts of Yemen provides the group with revenue and leverage and facilitates Iranian arms shipments to them. If Houthi control endures, lasting threats to regional security and maritime commerce could result. Efforts to end Houthi challenges through negotiation, whether or not they lead to short-term de-escalation, may embolden the Houthis to make new threats to neighbors, Israel, and maritime commerce. Attempting to degrade or dislodge them by force could result in major conflict in Yemen and the region with uncertain outcomes beyond deepening humanitarian consequences.

Congress has not specifically [authorized](#) U.S. military operations against the Houthis. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 national security supplemental act (P.L. 118-50) made available \$2.4 billion for operations, force protection, deterrence, and the replacement of combat expenditures in the CENTCOM area of operations. U.N. Security Council [Resolution 2722](#) (2024) calls on the Houthis to cease their attacks on international shipping and notes the right of states, in accordance with international law, to act to defend their vessels from attack.

Issues for Congress

In assessing whether and how to respond to Houthi and Israeli attacks on one another, Congress may consider various factors.

Regional Conflict Risks: Impact on U.S. Forces/Citizens and U.S. Support for Israel

Deeper conflict involving the Houthis may put at further risk thousands of U.S. military personnel deployed to the eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Horn of Africa, Arabian Peninsula, and Persian Gulf, along with U.S. citizens residing in the region. [The USS Theodore Roosevelt \(CVN-71\) carrier strike group](#) is operating in the Gulf of Aden to "deter aggression, promote regional stability, and protect the free flow of commerce in the region."

Escalation also could present challenges for Israel in maintaining military strength on several fronts—Gaza, Lebanon, and the West Bank—amid the [possibility](#) of a larger conflict with Lebanese Hezbollah. Congress and the Administration may consider the nature of Israeli operations and any potential shortfalls in Israel's defense capacity and stockpiles when weighing future direct U.S. involvement in Israel's defense and/or the timing, nature, and volume of arms shipments.

Humanitarian Aid to Yemen

The U.N. [estimates](#) that 21.6 million people in Yemen (more than half the population) need humanitarian assistance, 4.5 million are internally displaced, and 17 million are [food insecure](#). [Over 90% of staple cereals are imported](#), making the food supply susceptible to disruption. The 2024 U.N. Humanitarian Response Plan [appeal](#) for Yemen seeks \$2.7 billion. [Constraints on](#) humanitarian access affect aid delivery across Yemen, and the Houthis have [detained](#) U.N. and other humanitarian staff. In FY2023, the [United States](#) provided more than \$761 million in humanitarian assistance to Yemen.

U.S.-Israeli Counter Drone Cooperation

UAVs [pose](#) risks to Israeli and U.S. forces as hard to detect, cost-effective systems that can swarm aerial defense systems. Israel faces UAV threats from a range of Iran-backed forces including Hezbollah, [which fired dozens](#) of rockets and UAVs at Israel on July 21. In 2018, Congress first [authorized a cooperative U.S.-Israeli Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems \(C-UAS\)](#) program and then [extended that authority](#). Since FY2020, Congress has appropriated \$120 million in defense appropriations for C-UAS programs, including directed energy capabilities.

The Houthis and Terrorism Designations

In February 2021, the Biden Administration [revoked](#) the previous administration's designation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization [[see CRS In Focus IF10613, Foreign Terrorist Organization \(FTO\)](#)]. In January 2024, the U.S. State Department [designated the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group](#). On April 17, 2024, the House adopted H.R. 6046, which would direct the Administration to redesignate the Houthis as an FTO.

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