



[U.S.-Led Strikes Against the Houthis are Unlikely to Deter Continued Attacks in the Red Sea but Stoke Concern Regarding Possible Regional Escalations](#)

Late last week, the United States, along with the United Kingdom, launched airstrikes against Houthi targets in Yemen in an attempt to halt the group's months-long attacks on ships in the Red Sea. Experts have pointed out that while the U.S.-led strikes did hinder some significant targets, they do not appear likely to deter the Houthis' capabilities or intent to continue their attacks. The anticipated tit-for-tat actions to follow, particularly the longer they persist, have elicited fears though about the potential for further regional escalations. Senior U.S. officials and spokespeople for them have acknowledged that they certainly expected that the Houthis would probably respond with retaliatory strikes and thus the fact that this has in fact transpired is not a surprise by any means, but the risk of circumstances devolving and escalating remains due to the delicate nature of the situation.

According to analysis conducted in the aftermath of last week's targeted U.S.-led strikes, these only destroyed less than a third of the Houthi's overall offensive capabilities – with the group thus maintaining the majority of its ability to carry out attacks against ships in the Red Sea. As such, the Houthis have continued their maritime attacks in the seawater inlet. Over the past week, the Houthis fired an anti-ship cruise missile towards a U.S. Navy destroyer, but the ship was able to shoot it down. They also struck a U.S.-owned ship in the Gulf of Aden and a Malta-flagged bulk carrier in the Red Sea. All of this comes as the United States continues to launch additional strikes against Houthi targets. Issue experts have outlined that unless there is significant degradation of Houthi military capabilities from these targeted strikes, something that is highly unlikely considering the Houthis' large arsenal of anti-ship missiles, they will simply result in rising tensions and an increased chance for further regional escalations to occur. Moreover, it has also been asserted that the Houthis will probably continue their actions in the Red Sea because they have a lot to gain and little to lose by doing so.

All of these happenings in the Red Sea come amid the backdrop of other regional tensions and conflicts, which in conjunction, have exacerbated the fears of potential wider-scale escalations. Firstly, Israel's detrimental War on Gaza has surpassed the 100-day mark, resulting in a dire humanitarian crisis there and fueling outrage due to the number of civilians – a disturbing number of which have been children – that have been killed. In fact, the Houthis have stated that their attacks in the Red Sea are a response to Israel's destructive military campaign in Gaza and they have therefore vowed to target ships linked to Israel in an effort to pressure them to cease their bombardment of the Palestinian enclave. This is why so many peace and human rights activists have been highlighting the importance of an immediate and permanent cessation of Israeli hostilities – because it is the root cause of the worsening regional tensions that have transpired in recent months. As one commentator pointed out, "it was completely foreseeable that the longer the Gaza war drags on, the higher the risks of escalation and regional conflagration." Hence, we have seen the flare-up of tensions across the region in places other than the Red Sea in the face of Israel's continued War on Gaza. At the Israel-Lebanon border, recent exchanges of fire between Israel and Hezbollah have also heightened concern over the possibility of inflamed regional tensions and further escalations, as have deadly Iranian missile strikes in Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria.

In response to the Houthis' continued attacks in the Red Sea, the U.S. State Department announced this week that it would be relisting them as a global terrorist group. The Houthis had previously been designated as such back in

early 2021, in a move that was met with widespread concern from humanitarian groups who worried that the restrictions that come with the designation would severely hinder efforts to provide aid to Yemen's civilian population. Thus, President Biden delisted them upon taking office shortly thereafter. Now, the Biden administration appears as if it is trying to use the relisting as another attempt to deter Red Sea attacks, however, it does not seem likely to do so.

Even in the aftermath of the relisting announcement, Houthi attacks have carried on, prompting more commercial shipping to avoid transiting the Red Sea. According to S&P Global Commodities at Sea – an intelligence service that provides visibility into commodity supply, trade activities, and fleet analytics – the number of commercial ships navigating the Bab al-Mandab Strait is down by more than 50% this week alone compared to just last week. These figures have particularly seen a dip since the morning following the U.S.-led strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen. Not only have many of the large shipping lines instructed commercial vessels to stay clear of the Red Sea, sending them on longer routes around the continent of Africa, but avoiding the inlet has also caused major congestion at container terminals. It has been estimated that Houthi attacks have resulted in a whopping 70% of cargo ships steering clear of the Red Sea. Experts highlight that the disruptions serve as a reminder of the fragility of the components that tie together the world economy. Supply chains are extremely dependent on open waterways and ports in order to seamlessly move goods, especially in the highly globalized society that we live in.

In the end, what many are justifiably concerned with is the fear that the array of ongoing contentions will deteriorate into a larger-scale regional conflict involving some of the major actors. As analysts and others have argued, the longer Israel's War on Gaza continues, the less likely that regional actors are to keep showing a level of restraint. Therefore, level-headed observers share the belief that U.S.-led strikes – and even designations – against the Houthis will not put an end to their attacks on ships in the Red Sea, but conversely risk further regional escalation. While the parties involved are rightly hesitant to be dragged in to any direct confrontation, the possibility of circumstances degenerating and this taking place only increases with additional tit-for-tats, as does the potential for escalating tensions manifesting into the outbreak of other regional hostilities. The first priority and course of action that should be focused on instead to try and tackle this wave of recent aggravated tensions on multiple fronts should be to implement an immediate and lasting ceasefire in Gaza in order to address the underlying cause of so much of this, the Red Sea crisis included.