



# How To Strike Back Against The Houthis

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On Sunday, Israel carried out a long-range aerial attack on the Yemeni port of Hodeidah. The air strike, a retaliation for a drone incursion into Tel Aviv a day earlier that left one dead, killed at least six and wounded scores more in a signal that Israel was fully prepared to hit back at the country's Houthi rebels. But the Israeli retaliation also did something more: it highlighted a way to turn the tables on what has, until now, been an enormously successful campaign of economic blackmail along one of the world's most vital waterways.

Such an approach has been sorely lacking so far. Since mid-November, the Houthis have emerged as a major international menace, holding maritime commerce in the Red Sea at risk through repeated missile and drone strikes. Ostensibly, the ongoing campaign is a response to Israel's continuing military offensive in the Gaza Strip. But through it, the Yemeni militants – as well as their main benefactor, Iran – have gained significant leverage over the international community by holding global trade at risk.

The consequences have been nothing short of ruinous. Most immediately, the Houthi campaign has dented Egypt's already-rickety economy, robbing the country of more than \$2 billion in revenue by discouraging transit through the Suez Canal. International shippers, meanwhile, have redirected their vessels away from the vital Bab al-Mandab waterway, through which more than 10% of world commerce passes. The knock-on effects are being felt in rising world prices on everything from oil to foodstuffs.

So far, though, the West hasn't marshalled much of a response. When it took office in 2021, the Biden White House, citing humanitarian concerns, made removing the Houthis from the U.S. Foreign Terrorist Organization list a major foreign policy priority. That fateful decision has proven difficult to reverse fully, despite a growing Congressional outcry.

In much the same way, Washington has been slow to curtail the mounting threat the Houthis pose in Middle Eastern waters. Back in December, it somewhat belatedly launched "Operation Prosperity Guardian," a multi-nation maritime coalition designed to counter Houthi-led attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. But despite several targeted operations, this mechanism has failed to have much of an impact so far, with Houthi attacks continuing unabated.

Enter Israel. Although Israel's strike on Hodeidah was billed as a "direct response" to the drone attack on Tel Aviv, it had a more lasting strategic objective as well: to diminish the ability of the Houthis to project power abroad. The rebel-controlled Red Sea port serves as the "entry point for weapons that are supplied by Iran to its Houthi terrorist proxies," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu explained. "The Houthis have used those weapons to attack Israel, to attack Arab states in the region, to attack many others." As such, the Israeli strike – which succeeded in destroying significant port infrastructure and interrupting its functioning – has effectively severed the group's military supply lines, at least for a time.

For Western governments, the example should be instructive. Up to now, Washington and its international partners have been loath to retaliate forcefully to Houthi aggression, fearful of precipitating a wider Mideast war. But the lack of a serious Western response has only emboldened the Houthis further, to the point where the group is now threatening to target America's regional presence directly.

Pinprick strikes and maritime policing, in other words, simply aren't sufficient to change the calculus of the Houthis. To do that, America and its allies will need to focus on degrading the group's offensive capabilities and severing its supply lines – the way Israel has now begun to do.