

The Houthis are an Iran-backed, Shiite Islamist movement that seized control of Yemen's capital in 2014 and instigated civil war. Driven by an explicitly antisemitic and anti-American ethos, the Houthis are part of Iran's "Axis of Resistance" that includes Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Following Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, the Houthis have escalated attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea. Despite a significant record of terror and human rights abuses, the Biden administration de-listed the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 2021 only to partially restore sanctions in 2024.

1. The Houthis set in motion the ongoing civil war within Yemen

The Houthis [seized](#) Sanaa, Yemen's capital, in September 2014. Five months later, Yemen's president, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, [escaped](#) south to the port of Aden where he attempted to resume governing. However, the Houthis [advanced](#) on Aden the next month and Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia. A [coalition](#) of Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia subsequently launched a military campaign to restore the internationally-recognized government. The war in Yemen raged for seven years until the United Nations brokered a six-month [ceasefire](#) in April 2022. Hostilities remained limited in scope even after the agreement expired in October 2022. Peace talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis were [ongoing](#) when Hamas launched its October 7 attack.

2. Iran trains and provides weapons to the Houthis

Iran provides substantial military support to the Houthis, including drones, cruise missiles, and [ballistic missiles](#), which the Houthis have used to attack commercial vessels in the Red Sea as well as other targets. Further, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force both [trains](#) the group and provides it weapons smuggled via land and sea. The U.S. Navy has periodically [seized](#) Iranian-made weapons in transit. "It is clear that Iran continues shipment of advanced lethal aid to the Houthis," Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla, commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), [said](#) on January 16, 2024, after U.S. naval forces seized Iranian-made ballistic and cruise missile components.

3. The Houthis have repeatedly attacked Gulf partners and the U.S. military

Between 2015 and 2021, the Houthis [fired](#) 430 ballistic missiles and deployed 851 armed drones at Saudi targets. In 2019, a Houthi missile reportedly [injured](#) 29 people at Abha International Airport in southwestern Saudi Arabia, and in 2022, a Houthi drone struck Abu Dhabi International Airport. The Houthis have struck other critical infrastructure, including [Saudi energy facilities](#). In 2016, anti-ship cruise missiles were [fired](#) at the USS *Mason* while operating in international waters near Yemen. On January 14 2024, an anti-ship cruise missile [fired](#) towards the [USS Laboon](#) from Yemen was shot down by a U.S. fighter aircraft.

4. The Houthis are explicitly anti-American and antisemitic

The Houthis' official [slogan](#) is a clear expression of their core principles and goals: "Allah is the greatest, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory to Islam." Houthi leader Abdel Malik Baddredine al-Houthi [promised](#) on March 23, 2018, "If there is a new war with Israel, we will not hesitate to send the fighters." Several weeks after the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel, Houthi spokesperson Yahya Saree [declared](#) the group had launched "a large number of ballistic and winged missiles" at the "Israeli enemy."

5. The U.S. revoked the Houthis' FTO designation in 2021 then partially restored sanctions in 2024

The Trump administration [designated](#) the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in January 2021, [stating](#), "The designations are intended to hold [the Houthi movement] accountable for its terrorist acts, including cross-border attacks threatening civilian populations, infrastructure, and commercial shipping" and "to advance efforts to achieve a peaceful, sovereign, and united Yemen that is both free from Iranian interference and at peace with its neighbors." However, the Biden administration subsequently [delisted](#) the Houthis weeks later, purportedly to ease the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Yemenis. Notably, the Houthis have a track record of [stealing](#) aid from Yemen's starving and impoverished population. On January 17, 2024, the Biden administration reversed itself, [designating](#) the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) group but [limiting the impact](#) by not relisting them as an FTO and delaying implementation.

6. The Houthis have repeatedly targeted Israel since October 7

[Saudi Arabia](#) and the USS *Carney* guided missile destroyer [shot down](#) at least four land-attack cruise missiles and several drones that appeared to be launched at Israel by the Houthis on October 19. Two Houthi drones potentially [targeting](#) Israel fell short in Egypt, injuring six people on October 27. An aerial threat was [destroyed](#) by Israeli fighters and a surface-to-surface missile launched from the Red Sea region was [shot down](#) for the first time by Israel's Arrow aerial defense system on October 31. The Houthis have continued to launch attacks towards southern Israel, including on December 26 when the Israeli Air Force intercepted a [hostile aerial target](#) headed towards the Jewish state.

7. The Houthis are escalating attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea

[Twelve percent](#) of all global trade, amounting to \$1 trillion of goods per year, passes through the Suez Canal at the northwestern edge of the Red Sea. The Houthis have launched over 30 attacks on Red Sea targets since October 7, [ostensibly](#) as acts of solidarity with Palestinians. On November 19, the Houthis [seized](#) the Bahamas-flagged cargo ship *Galaxy Leader* and continue to hold the vessel and its 25 crew members hostage. U.S. Navy helicopters [sank](#) three Houthi fast boats, killing the crews, on December 31 after the militants fired upon them while attempting to board a container ship. As near-daily attacks continued, the United States and 13 other countries issued a [warning](#) on January 3 that the "Houthis will bear responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and the free flow of commerce." Despite the warning, the Houthis launched their most significant attack to date on January 9, with American and British ships and aircraft [thwarting](#) 18 one-way attack drones, two anti-ship cruise missiles, and one ballistic missile in the Red Sea, [according](#) to CENTCOM.

8. The U.S. is leading a multinational coalition to protect shipping in the Red Sea

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#) on December 18, following weeks of Houthi harassment of commercial ships. The initiative, run by the pre-existing [Combined Task Force 153](#), seeks to [ensure](#) freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The coalition, as of January 4, includes [22 countries](#) — with some providing military assets and others providing logistics and support staff. This follows the post-October 7 U.S. deployment of additional forces to the region, including the [USS Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) and [USS Gerald R. Ford](#) carrier strike groups, meant to deter other Iran-backed terrorist groups from also launching a major war against Israel. The Ford has since [completed](#) its deployment and left the Mediterranean.

9. The U.S. and UK began launching airstrikes against Houthi targets on January 11

American forces, in coordination with the United Kingdom, began launching [strikes](#) against the Houthis on January 11 that hit "over 60 targets at 16 Iranian-backed Houthi militant locations, including command and control nodes, munitions depots, launching systems, production facilities, and air defense radar systems," according to [CENTCOM](#). The USS *Carney* conducted a [follow-on strike](#) against a Houthi radar site on January 12. Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree [said](#) afterwards that the U.S. strikes will "not go unanswered or unpunished." Still, on January 16, U.S. forces [destroyed](#) four Houthi anti-ship ballistic missiles. A fourth strike on January 17 [neutralized](#) 14 Houthi missiles. The United States [conducted strikes](#) against Houthi anti-ship missiles again on [January 18](#), [January 19](#), [January 20](#), [January 22](#), and [January 24](#).

10. The Houthis have an extensive record of human rights abuses

The State Department's Human Rights and Practices [report](#) published in 2022 charged the Houthis with a litany of abuses, including torture, forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and extrajudicial killings. The report found that the Houthis and other Yemeni groups committed "significant abuses with impunity." In addition, the State Department's 2023 Trafficking in Persons [report](#) found that the Houthis continue to hold "summer camps" within Yemen to "indoctrinate, recruit, and use child soldiers" as young as 10 years of age.