Feature Commentary: An Assessment of Operation Rough Rider

By Gregory Johnsen

On March 15, 2025, the United States launched an offensive against the Houthis in Yemen with the stated goal of restoring "freedom of navigation" in the Red Sea and ending Houthi attacks on commercial shipping. Fifty-two days later, on May 5, the United States ended its operations in Yemen following an agreement with the Houthis that the group would no longer target U.S. military vessels or U.S. flagged ships. This article provides an assessment of that campaign, known as Operation Rough Rider, looking at what the United States hit, who was killed, and what it cost as well as how the Houthis have rebounded and regrouped, the current situation on the ground in Yemen, and what is likely to come next.

In November 2023, the Houthis began attacking commercial shipping in the Red Sea in response to Israel's offensive in Gaza. Within months, the militia group had succeeded in greatly reducing commercial traffic in and around the Red Sea. The United States, under both the Biden and Trump administrations, looked for ways to combat the attacks, moving from an initial "defend only" approach to an air campaign, which ran from mid-March to early May 2025. That campaign, known as Operation Rough Rider, ended following an agreement with the Houthis that the group would no longer target U.S. military vessels or U.S. flagged ships.[a]

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The Road to Conflict

Two days after he was sworn in for his second term as president, Donald Trump signed an executive order redesignating the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO).[1] In many ways, President Trump's second term picked up exactly where his first left off. Four years earlier, on January 19, 2021, on its last full day in office, the outgoing Trump administration had designated the Houthis an FTO.[2] Within a month, the Biden administration reversed course, removing the FTO label in an effort to revive the political process in Yemen and to limit the potential humanitarian impact on civilians in the country.[3]

Initially, the Biden administration's approach appeared to bear fruit. In April 2022, Saudi Arabia pressured Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Yemen's internationally recognized president, to step down in favor of an eight-man presidential council.[4] The change at the top coincided with a U.N.-brokered ceasefire,[5] which significantly reduced fighting in Yemen. The Houthis held much of the north, the loose configuration of anti-Houthi forces held the south and east, while Saudi Arabia provided air cover to prevent Houthi advances into Marib.

Then, on October 7, 2023, Hamas attacked Israel, killing over 1,000 people and abducting 251. Israel subsequently responded with a military invasion of Gaza. The Houthis, who struggle to govern effectively or popularly, seized on Hamas' attack and Israel's response to reignite conflict. This is where the group thrives. Fundamentally, the Houthis are a militia group that needs to fight to survive. When they are forced to act as a state—providing services, governing, and facing even a minimal amount of accountability—the group is at its most vulnerable.

For the Houthis, then, the war in Gaza presented opportunities both domestically and regionally. On the domestic front, it allowed them to expand the war. This was important for two reasons. First, the Houthis know that to survive long-term, the group will need an economic base of support from which to rule the country. The overwhelming majority of Yemen's exports are oil and gas, which are primarily located in three governorates—what one analyst calls Yemen's "triangle of power," Marib, Shabwa, and Hadramawt.[6] The Houthis currently control none of these governorates. If the group is to survive, it must control at least one of them, which is why the Houthis have been so relentless in their drive over the past five years to take Marib.[7] Without it, the group will never be secure. With Marib, however, the group would have both guaranteed income

a The details, such as they are, of the deal were outlined by Badr al-Busaidi, the Omani Foreign Minister, in a post on X. See Badr al-Busaidi, "Following recent discussions and contacts conducted by the Sultanate of Oman with the United States . . .," X, May 6, 2025.

and would be well positioned to push into Shabwa, which would effectively split the south, dividing the southern capital of Aden from its wealthiest governorate, Hadramawt. If the Houthis were able to take Marib and push into Shabwa, it would only be a matter of time before the group was able to take control of all of Yemen. This is why the war in Gaza came at such an opportune time for the Houthis. By October 2023, the ceasefire in Yemen had lasted for nearly a year and a half, and it was clear to the Houthis that the group would not be able to take Marib or Shabwa during peace time. To take additional territory, the group needed a return to war.

The Houthis also needed a continuation of the fighting to mute the domestic dissent that had arisen in areas under their control since the ceasefire began.[8] The Palestinian cause is, regardless of one's political affiliation, one of the most popular issues in Yemen. By wrapping themselves in the Palestinian flag and claiming that their actions were in defense of Palestinians, the Houthis were trying to do three things at once. First, position themselves domestically as the defender of the Palestinian cause. Second, by linking themselves to Palestine, the Houthis were making it harder to criticize them, since to criticize the Houthis would be, in at least some sense, to criticize Palestine. Finally, by taking action at least ostensibly on behalf of Palestinians, the Houthis wanted to create a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect should Israel or the United States respond militarily, which the Houthis believed would produce more recruits and further cement the group's hold on power.

Regionally, Houthi actions benefited Iran. By firing missiles and drones at Israel and attacking Israeli-linked shipping in the Red Sea, the Houthis could further Iranian regional ambitions while also providing Iran, who has trainers and commanders on the ground in Yemen, with at least a fig leaf of plausible deniability.[9] This was important for Iran, which at the time was looking to avoid a direct confrontation with Israel. So, Iran could encourage the Houthis and provide the group with ballistic missile components to strike at Israel, while avoiding direct Israeli retaliation.

On October 19, 2023, the Houthis fired a rocket at Israel, which a U.S. naval vessel, the USS Carney, shot down.[10] The Houthis tried again on October 28 and 31, but met with little success.[11] Next, on November 19, the group hijacked a cargo ship, the Galaxy Leader, taking 25 crew members hostage.[12] Soon thereafter, the Houthis settled on the strategy that proved highly effective: targeting commercial shipping in the Red Sea with missiles and drones.[13] Initially, the group said it was only targeting "Israeli-linked" ships, but this quickly grew into seemingly indiscriminate strikes on any ships in the Red Sea corridor. Very quickly, commercial traffic through the Red Sea dipped to less than half its normal volume.[14] Shipping companies chose to take a longer route around Africa and the Cape of Good Hope, which resulted in a spike in shipping costs. An average 40-foot shipping container went from $1,400-$1,600 to between $4,000 and $6,000, with most of those costs being passed on to consumers.[15]

No Good Options

Since the Houthis began attacking commercial shipping in the Red Sea in late 2023, the United States has had five broad options to respond, in addition to what it has been doing for years: implementing sanctions on key Houthi leaders and interdicting weapons shipments from Iran.[16] These options have not changed and are not necessarily mutually exclusive, even as the United States transitioned from a Biden administration to a Trump one.

Option 1 is what could be called "defend only." Under this course of action, the United States would deploy additional naval assets to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and shoot down any Houthi missile or drone attacks. The problem with this option, of course, is that it does little to either deter the Houthis from carrying out strikes or compel them to stop attacking commercial shipping. In fact, the economics of this option work against the United States, as it often uses $1-2 million dollar missiles to shoot down Houthi attacks that cost between $10,000 and $20,000.[17]

Option 2 could best be described as "limited strikes." In this option, the United States would carry out direct military strikes targeting only assets the Houthis used to fire on commercial shipping. In other words, the United States might hit mobile missile launchers, drone sites, radar sites, and weapon storage facilities, but would refrain from broader and more extensive strikes while also targeting Houthi command-and-control. The benefit of this option is that it shows the Houthis that the United States is serious and provides them with a clear off-ramp. As the Houthis reduce their attacks, the United States reduces its strikes on Houthi targets. Unfortunately, this option overlooks the domestic reasons the Houthis wanted this fight, particularly the economic motivations and the need to mute domestic dissent.

Option 3 is "extensive strikes." Under this scenario, the United States targets all known Houthi sites as well as its leadership, essentially attempting to bomb the Houthis into submission. This is the deter and degrade approach. The United States uses overwhelming air power to deter the Houthis from future attacks, while at the same time attempting to degrade the group's military capacities to the point that they are no longer capable of carrying out strikes on commercial shipping. This is the approach the United States would eventually take in Operation Rough Rider from March 15 to May 5, 2025.

Option 4 is best described as "deter, degrade, and defeat." In this scenario, the United States concludes that the attacks on commercial shipping will not stop until the Houthis are decisively defeated and removed from power in northern Yemen. Crucially, however, this approach requires ground troops complemented by a broad-based strategy. It can be local Yemeni ground forces, as part of the anti-Houthi coalition, Saudi or Emirati troops, or even U.S. forces. This is because the Houthis cannot be defeated by air power alone. Saudi Arabia and the UAE tried the air power-only approach beginning in 2015. At the time, the Saudis thought the war in Yemen would last "six weeks."[18] More than a decade later, Saudi Arabia is still there. Obviously, after lengthy and largely failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States does not want to put boots on the ground in Yemen. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, after more than a decade of a failed war in Yemen, are similarly skeptical of getting drawn back into a long and bloody guerrilla war with no guarantee of success. That leaves the anti-Houthi coalition forces, who are represented by Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). The best version of this scenario is something like the United States' counter-Islamic State campaign in which the United States provided the air power and the Syrian Democratic Forces acted as the primary ground component.

Option 5 is "strike Iran." In this course of action, the United States determines that the Houthis are only the symptom of a broader problem, which is rooted in Iran's attempts to violently export its revolution. After all, the Houthis are heavily dependent on Iranian smuggling of ballistic missile components, Iranian targeting data,

Aircraft assigned to Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 1 launches from the flight deck of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75) during flight operations in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility, posted March 26, 2025, on U.S. Central Command's X account. (U.S. Department of Defense/CENTCOM)

and Iranian officers to carry out the group's attacks on commercial shipping.[19] So, instead of attacking the Houthis, the United States goes directly to the source of the problem and carries out sustained strikes against Iran.[b] Of course, this option carries significant risks, and instead of avoiding a broader regional war that would consume more U.S. resources, it could initiate just such a conflict.

This was the menu of options that the Biden administration had in November 2023, and it was largely the same menu that the Trump administration had in March 2025. Over the past year and a half, the United States has either attempted or threatened nearly all of these options, with little success.

Initially, in November and December of 2023, the Biden administration attempted option 1, the defend-only approach.[20] But in addition to the cost disparity, the presence of increased U.S. naval patrols did little to reassure international shipping companies to return to the Red Sea, particularly when many were facing increased insurance rates. In January 2024, the Biden administration moved to option 2—limited strikes—moving from Operation Prosperity Guardian to Operation Poseidon Archer.[21] The Biden administration continued to carry out strikes on Houthi targets directly involved in attacks on commercial shipping throughout 2024. The last documented attempted Houthi attack on a commercial ship came in December 2024, prior to the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.[22] The limited strike option did little to deter or prevent Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

When the Trump administration took office in January 2025, it quickly signaled that it was going to "eliminate the Houthis' capabilities and operations, deprive them of resources, and thereby end their attacks on U.S. personnel and civilians, U.S. partners, and maritime shipping in the Red Sea."[23] Or as Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth later put it in the now infamous Signal chat, the Trump administration wanted to do two things: "restore freedom of navigation and re-establish deterrence."[24] In an effort to accomplish those goals, the United States launched Operation Rough Rider on March 15, 2025.

Operation Rough Rider

Over the course of 52 days, from March 15 to May 5, the United States carried out over 1,100 strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen, with the expressed goal of restoring deterrence and freedom of navigation.[25] The United States hit everything from command and control facilities, weapon storage depots, air defense systems, and

b The United States did carry out limited strikes on June 22, 2025, hitting three Iranian nuclear facilities. See Farnaz Fassihi, David E. Sanger, and Aaron Boxerman, "What to Know About the U.S. Strike on Iran and the Israel-Iran Cease-Fire," *New York Times*, June 12, 2025.

weapons factories to warehouses, military bases, the captured cargo ship Galaxy Leader, port facilities, key Houthi figures, and houses thought to contain high-value targets.[26] It made mistakes, striking a migrant detention center in Sanaa[27] and killing dozens of civilians in strikes on an oil terminal on the Red Sea coast.[28] But it also reportedly killed several mid- and high-ranking Houthi officials, including Abd al-Rabb Jarfan,[29] the deputy chief of staff to Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, the supreme leader of the movement, as well as Zakaria Hajar, a drone unit commander, and members of the Military Manufacturing Force.[30]

Yet, these were not debilitating losses for the group. After 52 days of bombings, the U.S. intelligence community (according to *The New York Times*) issued a stinging assessment: U.S. strikes had caused "some degradation," but the Houthis were in a position to easily reconstitute, regroup, and rebound.[31] That assessment matches that of regional experts, many of whom argue as Ned Whalley did, that after the U.S. campaign, "Houthi power remains entrenched, its drone and missile capabilities weakened, but intact."[32] The general view of specialists is that the United States failed to defeat, decisively deter, or even significantly degrade the group.

The United States put itself in almost a no-win situation with Operation Rough Rider. The goal of the operation was to end the threat of Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, but that is a goal that can only be accomplished by defeating the Houthis and removing them from power in northern Yemen. What the United States ended up with was a compromise: The Houthis would not attack U.S. ships. So long as the Houthis remain in Sanaa, the group will present a threat to broader commercial shipping. The Houthis have lost neither their capabilities nor the desire to attack commercial shipping;[33] rather, the group has only agreed to pause such attacks, while it continues to fire missiles at Israel.[34]

To fully remove the threat to freedom of navigation, the Houthis would have to be removed from power, and that is not something that can be done through air power alone. For that, the United States would need ground troops. However, in nearly two months of strikes, no ground offensive materialized. The United States did not coordinate well with the disparate Yemeni groups on the ground,[35] who are too divided to present a unified threat to the Houthis. Indeed, this is where the comparison to the United States' counter-Islamic State campaign breaks down. Unlike the Syrian Democratic Forces, who were fairly united, the anti-Houthi coalition in Yemen is deeply divided. Some members of the Presidential Leadership Council advocate for a single, unified Yemeni state, while others, most notably the Southern Transitional Council, want the south to secede and establish its own independent state.[36] There are also long histories on the PLC. Tariq Saleh, the nephew of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, fought for more than three years alongside the Houthis in Sanaa from 2014 until 2017, when the former president broke with the Houthis and was subsequently killed. In the past, troops affiliated with the STC have clashed violently with soldiers loyal to Islah, a political party linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.[37] Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not help either, as both have picked certain Yemeni elements to back at the expense of others.[c] The United States simply does not have a viable partner on the ground that it can work by, with, and through to achieve other objectives.

It is a similar situation on the regional front. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE wants to send ground troops into Yemen, particularly as both countries are trying to extract themselves from the country after a decade of fighting the Houthis. The last thing either country wants is to get drawn back into a war that has gone on far longer than either one expected.

That would leave only the United States, which never seriously considered using ground forces in Yemen. To be clear, the United States could defeat the Houthis, but it would likely take months and involve significant casualties, costs neither the Biden nor the Trump administration was willing to bear. From the beginning, in the author's view, Operation Rough Rider was a mismatch of a desired end state and the means used to achieve it.

The best that could have realistically been hoped for is essentially what emerged: a ceasefire deal in which the Houthis agree not to target U.S.-flagged ships, commercial and naval, and the United States agrees to stop bombing the Houthis. But such a deal, and the operation that produced it, has also had significant costs.

The Costs

First, there are the costs in lost planes, downed drones, and used munitions. Throughout Operation Rough Rider, the United States lost two FA-18s, one of which rolled overboard when the aircraft carrier it was on used evasive maneuvers to avoid a Houthi attack and another in a failed landing.[38] Each plane cost just over $67 million.[39] The Houthis also shot down at least seven U.S. Reaper drones during the operation, which totals more than $200 million in loses.[40] Then, there are the munitions. The United States used so many munitions—some estimates put the cost at over $1 billion and the total operation costs near $2 billion[41]—that, according to *The New York Times*, some defense planners worry that the United States might not have enough stand-off munitions to deter China from making a move on Taiwan.[42]

Perhaps even more important, however, are the costs of perception and reputation. The Houthis, like any insurgent group, win by not losing. It is how the group has survived and grown from each of its wars. The Houthis never won any of the group's six wars against the Yemeni government from 2004-2010. Indeed, at times it looked like the group was on the verge of being eliminated, particularly after its founder, Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi, was killed in 2004. But the Houthis survived each round and came back stronger. It was the same story with Saudi and Emirati bombing from 2015 to 2022. The Houthis hunkered down, absorbed the bombs, and lived to fight another day. Each time, the onus was on the aggressor—the Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia, the UAE—to uproot and eradicate the Houthis, and each time, they failed. In the author's view, that is exactly what has happened to the United States.

The Houthis are already spinning Operation Rough Rider as a win, saying that the group was able to withstand everything the

c For instance, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE picked four members each of the Presidential Leadership Council. The STC, a group backed by the UAE, is at odds with Islah, a group backed by Saudi Arabia. The UAE is also very opposed to Islah.

United States could throw at them and hit back.[43] For the Houthis, the 52 days of bombings were not a one-off; it was simply the latest round in a war the group has been fighting since 2004. The only difference is that the next time the Houthis fight the United States—and the group appears to be preparing for the next round—it will have the confidence that, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, it can simply outlast the United States.

What Comes Next?

The Houthis, as their actions since May 5, 2025, have demonstrated, will continue to fire missiles and drones at Israel. On May 19, two weeks after the ceasefire deal with the United States, the Houthis announced a "maritime blockade" of Israel's Haifa port.[44] The group struck Ben Gurion International Airport in early May, injuring six people,[45] and has attacked Israel multiple times since. On May 28, Israel bombed the Sanaa International Airport in retaliatory strikes,[46] and on June 14, Israel conducted a strike in Sanaa that reportedly targeted Muhammad al-Ghamari, the Houthis' military chief of staff.[47] This back-and-forth is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, particularly if the Houthis become more involved in the Israeli-Iranian conflict, which began on June 13. As of this writing, the Houthis have remained relatively quiet—launching a few missiles at Israel on June 13 and 14—but otherwise waiting in an apparent attempt to coordinate the group's actions with broader Iranian strategy.

Either way, the Red Sea crisis is far from over. The Houthis will take away two lessons from Operation Rough Rider. First, the group continues to understand exactly how disruptive it can be to the global economy by targeting commercial shipping. Second, it knows—or at least seems to believe—that it can outlast the United States in any bombing campaign. Whenever the group feels threatened or wants to make a point in the future, it knows that it can fire a few missiles or drones at commercial ships and create a crisis for the United States. What's more, Russia and China know this as well, which means that in the future the Houthis could become one more tool these adversaries leverage against the United States. CTC

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