

U.S. Officials Care More About Protecting Oil Tankers Than Palestinians

The United States is demanding an end to attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea, but it won't support a ceasefire in Gaza.

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*While Israel continues its military offensive in [Gaza](#), the United States is directing a major military operation in the Red Sea, where **U.S. warships are maintaining a persistent presence to protect shipping lanes**.*

With its recently launched [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#), **the United States is leading a multinational military coalition to occupy the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab, where oil tankers and commercial vessels have come under attack by Houthi militants in Yemen**. The U.S.-led military intervention has brought the United States into [direct conflict](#) with the Houthis, who insist that they will continue their attacks until Israel ends its military offensive in Gaza.

"This is about the protection of one of the major commerce routes of the world in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab," a senior official in the Biden administration [said](#).

Strategic Waterways

For years, the U.S. military has played a central role in the Red Sea, a large waterway between northeastern Africa and the Arabian peninsula that facilitates regional commerce. In April 2022, the U.S. military oversaw the creation of [Combined Task Force 153](#), a multinational naval partnership to patrol the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandab, and Gulf of Aden.

"As everyone can appreciate, those waters are critical to the free flow of commerce throughout the region," **Vice Admiral Brad Cooper**, the regional U.S. naval commander, [explained](#) at the time.

The [Red Sea](#) is a vital shipping route, accounting for nearly 15 percent of all seaborne trade. It facilitates commerce between Europe and Asia, enabling commercial ships to save time by passing through the Middle East rather than taking a longer route around Africa.

The Red Sea is also a major [transit route](#) for the world's oil and natural gas. Significant amounts of oil from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the Persian Gulf are routed through the Red Sea to markets in Asia, Europe, and North America. Overall, the Red Sea accounts for 8 percent of global trade in liquefied natural gas and 12 percent of seaborne trade in oil.

“The Red Sea is a vital waterway,” White House spokesperson **John Kirby** [said](#) at a January 3 press briefing. “A significant amount of global trade flows through that Red Sea.”

Of particular concern to U.S. officials is the Bab al-Mandab, a strait at the southern end of the Red Sea. Only 18 miles wide at its narrowest point, the strait forms a chokepoint that forces commercial vessels into tight shipping lanes. As of early 2023, an estimated [8.8 million barrels of oil](#) passed through the Bab al-Mandab every day, making it one of the world's most significant chokepoints.

“The Bab al-Mandab Strait is a strategic route for oil and natural gas shipments,” the U.S. Energy Information Agency [notes](#).

Operation Prosperity Guardian

Now that the Houthis are attacking commercial vessels in the Red Sea, the United States is establishing a larger military presence in the region with [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#). Under this new initiative, the United States is working with its coalition partners to establish what U.S. officials call a “[persistent presence](#)” in the southern Red Sea, meaning that coalition warships and other military assets will remain actively spread out across the area in a kind of military occupation.

“Together, we now have the largest surface and air presence in the southern Red Sea in years,” Cooper [said](#) at a January 4 press briefing.

As part of the operation, warships from France, Great Britain, and the United States are positioned throughout the southern Red Sea. They have been reinforced by the Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group, which is located in the Gulf of Aden.

Already, the U.S.-led military coalition has engaged in hostilities with the Houthis, including one incident on December 31 in which U.S. forces [sank](#) three Houthi small boats, killing 10 fighters.

“It's up to the Houthis to halt the attacks,” Cooper insisted. “They're the instigator and initiator.”

The United States and the Houthis

This is not the first time that the United States has come into conflict with the Houthis. For years, the United States supported Saudi Arabia's [war in Yemen](#) against the Houthis. Both the Obama and Trump administrations provided a Saudi-led military coalition with advanced

weaponry and military advice, even as it repeatedly committed [war crimes](#) by striking civilian targets.

The Saudi-led military intervention sparked one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, leading to the deaths of more than [377,000 people](#). A temporary [truce](#) that began in April 2022 led to a reduction in hostilities, but the war has never ended, creating fears that it could reignite at any moment.

"Nobody should believe that the current state of affairs with relatively low levels of fighting is going to last," **Senator Chris Murphy** (D-CT) [noted](#) late last year.

Throughout Saudi Arabia's military campaign in Yemen and Israel's military campaign in Gaza, the United States has been the main power behind the scenes, arming its allies while their military operations have caused tremendous harm to civilians. Officials in Washington have insisted that they have sought to minimize civilian casualties, but their priority has been to prevent the wars from disrupting commerce in nearby waterways, especially in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab.

"There's no question in my mind that this is very important, not only to the countries in the region but globally," **Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin** [said](#) last month, referring to the need to ensure freedom of navigation. "What the Houthis are doing affects commerce around the globe."

U.S. Considerations

As several powerful companies have begun [halting](#) their operations in the Red Sea, some current and former U.S. officials have been calling for stronger military action, such as military strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen. The United States previously took direct action against the Houthis in October 2016, when a U.S. warship [fired](#) cruise missiles against radar sites in Yemen.

Still, high-level officials have been careful about taking the war directly to the Houthis. So far, President Biden has decided against striking Houthi targets, even after being presented with [military options](#).

A major concern in Washington is that any kind of escalation against the Houthis could reignite the war in Yemen, which has already left the Houthis with the [upper hand](#). When former CIA analyst Bruce Riedel considered the prospect of a U.S. war in Yemen late last year, he questioned whether the people of the United States would support such a war.

"I would venture that if you ask 100 Americans, 'who are the Houthis?'" Riedel [said](#), "99 percent of them would say, 'the whats, the whats?'"

Another major concern is that a U.S. war against the Houthis would create further complications for the United States and its allies. If the United States attacked the Houthis, then the Houthis might respond by bringing the war to areas beyond the Red Sea, such as Israel. Already, the Houthis have launched [drones and missiles](#) toward Israel.

Officials in the Biden administration have been so concerned about the implications of going to war against the Houthis that they have not accused the Houthis of attacking the United States, even as the Houthis have repeatedly fired drones and missiles in the direction of U.S. warships. Administration officials have claimed that they cannot conclude with certainty that

the Houthis have deliberately targeted U.S. military forces.

Additional members of the current U.S.-led military coalition share similar concerns, with some even going so far as to [refuse to disclose their participation](#) in the U.S.-led military coalition. Whereas some are concerned about retaliation, others fear what people might think about their participation in a military operation that is indifferent to the suffering of the people of Gaza.

“Not all want to become public,” Kirby [acknowledged](#).

Implications for Gaza

While officials in Washington weigh their options, they are doing little to address the core issue, which is Israel’s ongoing military campaign in Gaza. The Biden administration [opposes](#) a ceasefire, even as it repeatedly demands that the Houthis end their attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea.

Essentially, the Biden administration is engaging in a form of imperial management, as it works to help Israel continue its military campaign in Gaza while limiting its effects on regional dynamics and global markets. Rather than backing a ceasefire, the Biden administration is hoping to minimize the repercussions of Israel’s offensive for the global economy and contain any movement toward a wider war.

What the Biden administration has shown, in short, is that it cares far more about protecting fossil fuels and the world’s most powerful businesses than it does about protecting the people of Gaza.

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