

## [United States Actions in Yemen Helped Create Current Crisis](#)

**If the U.S. had supported pro-democracy forces in 2011, the current situation might be very different.**

There are a number of issues of concern regarding the U.S.-led [bombing campaign](#) against Houthi targets in Yemen, one of the [poorest countries](#) in the world. Like other military operations ordered by the President without Congressional authorization, it raises serious [constitutional questions](#). The strikes have thus far not had the intended effect of curbing Houthi attacks on international shipping. They have [undermined](#) the UN-led peace process to finally end that country's nine-year civil war. Not surprisingly, there is a degree of incredulity in the [Biden Administration's claim](#) that "We will continue to work to avoid a wider conflict in the region" while bombing Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

Moreover, the United States may have played a significant role in bringing the Houthis—once a small rebel group representing a minority tribe in the north of Yemen—to control nearly three-quarters of the western part of that country, where the vast majority of its thirty-three million people live.

Middle Eastern governments may [condemn](#) Israel's war on Gaza and [criticize](#) the United States for supporting it, but none of them dare to take on Israel or the United States directly. Irregular groups, however—as well as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis, and various militias operating in Syria and Iraq—have more freedom of action. In doing so, they increase their power and influence among the region's peoples angered by the ongoing mass killing of Palestinian civilians and their governments' inability or unwillingness to act.



Aerial bombardments on Sana'a, Yemen from Saudi Arabia, March 2016. fahd sami, CC BY 3.0

Becoming the victims of bombing by the United States and its allies has actually [strengthened](#) the Houthis politically. Despite widespread opposition to the Houthis, [millions of Yemenis](#) have taken to the streets in protest of the bombing.

While the [pro-Iran](#) militias in Iraq and Syria, also subjected to U.S. air strikes, may indeed be considered proxies of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Iran's ties to the Houthis are more indirect. Though Iran has [supplied](#) some weaponry to the group, the Houthis have their own origins and political agenda. Their attacks on ships in the Red Sea are not on behalf of Iran, but out of a sincere sense of [solidarity](#) with the Palestinians in Gaza and a desire to advance their standing in Yemen—where their rule is [decidedly unpopular](#) and has been met by years of popular protests.

Attacking shipping in international waters is a clear [violation](#) of international law, but so is bombing civilian targets on a massive scale. The Houthi attacks on international shipping have thus far not resulted in a single fatality. By contrast, the Israeli bombing as of this writing has killed more than [27,000](#) civilians. The United States has [taken the lead](#) in challenging the Houthis for their contravention of international legal norms while being primarily responsible, through U.N. Security Council [vetoes](#) and other actions, for preventing international action in response to ongoing war crimes by Israel.

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Secretary of State Antony Blinken [claims](#) “these attacks by the Houthis are hurting people around the world—most of all, the poorest and most vulnerable populations, including in Yemen, including in Gaza.” Bombing Yemen, therefore, according to Blinken, is based on altruistic motivations. By contrast, the Biden Administration has refused to acknowledge how Israel's war on Gaza and Western support for military operations—which have primarily impacted civilians—may have provoked the Houthis' efforts to interrupt international shipping

### **How the Houthis came to power**

At the height of the Arab Spring in 2011, a [broad-based, nonviolent, pro-democracy](#) movement in Yemen rose up against the U.S.-backed government of dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh. If Washington and Saudi Arabia had allowed this coalition to come to power, the Houthis would not likely have ever seized control of much of that country.

The popular movement of thirteen years ago forged an impressive degree of unity among the various tribal, regional, sectarian, and ideological groups that [took part](#) in the pro-democracy protests, which included mass marches, sit-ins, and many other forms of nonviolent civil resistance. Leaders of prominent tribal coalitions—including the Houthis—publicly supported the popular insurrection, prompting waves of tribespeople to leave their guns at home and head to the capital to take part in the movement.

These tribespeople, along with the hundreds of thousands of city dwellers on the streets, were encouraged to maintain nonviolent discipline, even in the face of [government snipers](#) and other provocations that led to the deaths of hundreds of unarmed protesters.

After [initially backing](#) Saleh in the face of the protests, the United States and Saudi Arabia, joined by the other monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), presented a [plan](#) after months of protests whereby Saleh would step down. According to the deal, he and other top officials in the regime would be granted immunity from prosecution, and a plebiscite would be held within sixty days to ratify the transfer of power to Saleh's vice president, Major General Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi.

Pro-democracy protesters largely [rejected](#) this U.S.-Saudi mandate for Hadi. In mid-August, opposition activists formed a [national council](#), which they hoped would form a provisional government until multiparty elections could be held. It consisted of 143 members representing a broad coalition of protest leaders, tribal sheiks, South Yemen separatists, opposition military commanders, former members of the governing party, and the Houthis militia representing the Zaydi minority in the north.

The Saudi and the U.S. governments, however, kept pushing for Saleh to transfer power to his vice president. Supporters of the National Council [saw](#) these foreign efforts as essentially a plot to foil the revolution. Protest leader Tawakkol Karman, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her leadership in the pro-democracy protests, [observed](#), “There shouldn’t be any place for tyrants in the free world. This is against all international agreements, laws, and covenants.”

“Yemen’s pro-democracy activists largely blame the U.S. for failing to live up to its rhetoric.”—  
*Francisco Martin-Royal*

As Francisco Martin-Royal, an expert on counter-radicalization in the region, [wrote](#) at that time, “The lack of U.S. support means that these young men and women, who effectively ousted Saleh and continue to call for democratic institutions, have broadly failed to have a voice in the formation of Yemen’s new government or have their legitimate concerns be taken seriously.”

He continued, “Yemen’s pro-democracy activists largely blame the U.S. for failing to live up to its rhetoric—a disillusionment that potentially makes them vulnerable to recruitment by other well-organized forces that are against the existing regime, namely extremist groups.”

U.S. Ambassador Gerald Feierstein [kept pushing](#) the vague idea of a “national dialogue” among elites and criticized ongoing protests within the government institutions on the grounds that “the problems have to be resolved through this process of dialogue and negotiations.” He [castigated](#) the pro-democracy activists, saying, “We’ve also been clear in saying we don’t believe that the demonstrations are the place where Yemen’s problems will be solved.”

In February 2012, President Barack Obama [publicly endorsed](#) Hadi, claiming—despite Hadi’s service as vice president in a repressive regime and his distinction as the only candidate in the subsequent plebiscite—that his subsequent election was “a model for how peaceful transition in the Middle East can occur.”

The pro-democracy movement thus largely gave up on the United States, with prominent young pro-democracy activist Khaled al-Anesi [fuming](#), “This revolution has been stabbed in the back.”

This marginalization of Yemeni civil society—which had struggled nonviolently for democracy for so many months—and Washington’s failure to accept the broad-based National Council to head an interim government created the conditions that led to the dramatic resurgence of the armed Houthi uprising, which, until that year, had only operated in the Zaydi heartland in the far northern part of the country.

The Houthis were helped by the Hadi government’s lack of credibility, ongoing [corruption](#) and ineptitude at all levels of government, a mass resignation of Yemen’s cabinet, and controversial proposals for constitutional change. They also received support from armed groups allied with the former Saleh dictatorship, which enabled the Houthis—who represent [only a minority](#) of Yemenis—to nevertheless emerge as the most powerful force in the country. They surprised the world by seizing the capital of Sanaa in August 2014, consolidating power the following January, and subsequently expanding southward.

Most Yemenis [strongly oppose](#) the Houthi militia and, in Taiz and other parts of the country, have challenged their armed advance through massive [civil resistance](#) and other nonviolent means.

This unarmed resistance, however, was soon supplanted by a nearly decade-long [U.S.-backed](#) bombing of Yemen by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which was responsible for the deaths of nearly [10,000 Yemeni civilians](#) and likely tens of thousands more from malnutrition and preventable diseases [resulting from](#) the bombing and blockades. And it failed to dislodge the Houthis.



Map of Operation Prosperity Guardian, the U.S.-led military operation begun in December 2023.

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Now, the Houthis are once again the target of bombing from foreign powers, this time directly from the United States and some European allies. Not only are there questions as to whether it will be effective in destroying the majority of mobile missile launchers that can quickly and easily be hidden from airstrikes, but it is simply adding to the suffering of Yemenis from years of bombing and civil war.

It would be much too simplistic to blame the Houthis' rise to power and their attacks on international shipping entirely on the United States. However, one still has to wonder: If, instead of allying with Saudi autocrats to install another strongman in the name of stability, the United States had supported that country's nonviolent pro-democracy movement, would the current crisis in the Red Sea have ever happened?