

Military Confrontation in the Red Sea and the Broader Middle East War? The Drumbeat for Western Military Action against Yemen

Further escalation is exactly the wrong thing to do if the U.S. doesn't want the war to spread.

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It must be time for another round of hyperventilating about Iranian naval vessels. Bloomberg published this [report](#) today:

Iran's dispatch of a warship to the Red Sea is its boldest move yet to challenge US forces in the key trade route, emboldening Houthi militants whose missiles have disrupted shipping over the past two months.

Tehran is unlikely to want direct confrontation — its old frigate being no match for the US-led maritime task force patrolling the waters off Yemen — but it takes the projection of Iranian power in the region to another level.

The Iranian government periodically sends its ships to show their flag in different places, and every time there is a ridiculous overreaction in the West. In 2021, they sent two of their ships into the Atlantic. Deranged hawks feared might be headed to Venezuela (to supply them with speedboats!), but it turned out that they were just on their way to [participate](#) in a commemorative event in Russia. Then two ships made a [port call](#) in Rio de Janeiro last year, and we were once again treated to a hawkish freakout over the dire "threat" that these ships allegedly posed to the entire hemisphere. Now they have sent a frigate to the Red

Sea, which is even less remarkable than sending ships into the Atlantic. It must be time to panic again.

As everyone understands, one frigate poses no real threat to the many U.S. ships that have been sent to ~~run interference for Israel's atrocious war in Gaza~~ protect "freedom of navigation," and this particular frigate is fifty year-old relic of the pre-revolutionary monarchy's military spending spree. Sending one ship into an international waterway isn't projecting much power at all, so it is hard to take seriously claims that it takes Iranian power projection to "another level." The fact that the Iranian government is sending only one ship shows that it has no intention of doing anything in the Red Sea, and it is at most signaling its support for Houthi actions. All of this underscores that the hawkish fear of Iran as a would-be regional hegemon is laughable.

The real danger in the Red Sea is not a solitary Iranian ship. It is not even the Houthis' drone and missile attacks. The true danger is the drumbeat for Western military action against Yemen. The Sunday Times [reported](#) that the U.K. was preparing to launch strikes in concert with the U.S. and possibly one other European government:

Under the plans the UK would join with the US and possibly another European country to unleash a salvo of missiles against pre-planned targets, either in the sea or in Yemen itself, where the militants are based.

It is understood that the co-ordinated strikes could involve RAF warplanes or HMS Diamond, a Type 45 destroyer which successfully destroyed an attack drone with a Sea Viper missile in the Red Sea this month.

A statement is expected to be released by Britain and the US in the coming days that will warn the Houthis to stop attacking commercial vessels or face the West's military might.

As I said last week, this is extremely stupid. The Houthis will almost certainly ignore these warnings, and then the U.S. and its partners will then feel compelled to back up their ill-advised threats by escalating. When the first rounds of strikes achieve little or nothing, there will be predictable demands for more. Rather than acknowledge failure, the Biden administration and the other governments will then press on with a bombing campaign that will kill many Yemenis without stopping Houthi attacks. That in turn would likely provoke more Houthi attacks on a wider range of targets. Instead of stabilizing the region and ensuring safe passage for commercial vessels, this would have the opposite effect on both counts.

The one thing that might actually stop the attacks for the foreseeable future would be to pressure the Israeli government to halt its destructive campaign, so of course this is the one option that no Western government is seriously contemplating.

Matt Duss [remarked](#) on this earlier today:

The idea that the US should open a new front against the Houthis in response to their attacking shipping in protest of the Gaza massacre instead of, you know, *ending support for the Gaza massacre* is one of the most DC-brained things ever.

If the U.S. successfully pressed for a ceasefire and an end to the siege, it is likely that Houthi

attacks on commercial shipping would also stop. The U.S. ought to be pressing for a ceasefire and an end to the siege anyway because its support for the collective punishment of the people of Gaza is a terrible crime. It would have the added benefit of reducing tensions elsewhere in the region.

Further escalation is exactly the wrong thing to do if the U.S. doesn't want the war to spread. That means that the U.S. should be leaning hard on the Israeli government to scrap any plans it might have for a new [campaign in Lebanon](#), and it also means shutting down all this talk of striking targets in Yemen. The U.S. can't afford and shouldn't seek new wars anywhere, and especially not in the Middle East.

If the Biden administration chooses escalation on one or more fronts, it will be responsible for the ensuing regional disaster.

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