

Futile and Dangerous: U.S. Bombing Yemen in the Name of Shipping. What's the Hidden Agenda?

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What a show. As US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was promoting a message of calm restraint and firm control in limiting the toxic fallout of Israel's horrific campaign in Gaza, a decision was made by his government, the United Kingdom and a few other reticent collaborators to strike targets in Yemen, including the capital Sana'a. These were done, purportedly, as retribution for attacks on international commercial shipping in the Red Sea by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

The wording in a White House [media release](#) mentions the operation's purpose and the relevant participants.

"In response to continued illegal, dangerous, and destabilizing Houthi attacks against vessels, including commercial shipping, transiting the Red Sea, the armed forces of the United States and the United Kingdom, with support from the Netherlands, Canada, Bahrain, and Australia, conducted joint strikes in accordance with the inherent right of individual and collective self-defense".

US Air Forces Central Command further [revealed](#) that the "multinational action targeted radar systems, defense systems, and storage and launch sites for one way attack unmanned aerial systems, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles."

The rationale by the Houthis is that they are targeting shipping with a direct or ancillary Israeli connection, hoping to niggle them over the barbarities taking place in Gaza. As the Israeli Defence Forces are getting away with, quite literally, bloody murder, the task has fallen to other forces to draw attention to that fact. Houthi spokesperson Mohammed Abusalam's [post](#) was adamant that

“there was no threat to international navigation in the Red and Arabian Seas, and the targeting was and will continue to affect Israeli ships or those heading to the ports of occupied Palestine.”

But that narrative has been less attractive to the supposedly law-minded types in Washington and London, always mindful that commerce trumps all. Preference has been given to such shibboleths as freedom of navigation, the interests of international shipping, all code for the protection of large shipping interests. No mention is made of the justification advanced by the Houthi rebels and the Palestinian plight, a topic currently featuring before the International Court of Justice in the Hague.

Another feature of the strikes is the absence of a Security Council resolution from the United Nations, technically the sole body in the international system able to authorise the use of force under the UN Charter. A White House [statement](#) on January 11 attributes authority to the strikes much the same way the administration of George W. Bush did in justifying the warrantless, and illegal invasion of Iraq in March 2003. (Ditto those on his same, limited bandwidth, Tony Blair of the UK and John Howard of Australia.) On that occasion, the disappointment and frustrations of weapons inspectors and rebukes from the UN about the conduct of Saddam Hussein, became vulnerable to hideous manipulation by the warring parties.

On this occasion, a “broad consensus as expressed by 44 countries around the world on December 19, 2023” and “the statement by the UN Security Council on December 1, 2023, condemning Houthi attacks against merchant and commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea” is meant to add ballast. Lip service is paid to the self-defence provisions of the UN Charter.

In a [separate statement](#), Biden justified the attack on Houthi positions as necessary punishment for “unprecedented Houthi attacks against international maritime vessels in the Red Sea – including the use of anti-ship ballistic missiles for the first time in history.” He also made much of the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian, “a coalition of more than 20 nations committed to defending international shipping and deterring Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.” No mention of the Israeli dimension here, at all.

In addition to the pregnant questions on the legality of such strikes in international law, the attacks, at least as far as US execution was concerned, was far from satisfactory to some members of Congress. Michigan Democratic Rep. Rashita Tlaib [was irked](#) that US lawmakers had not been consulted. “The American people are tired of endless war.” Californian Rep. Barbara Lee [warned](#) that,

“Violence only begets more violence. We need a ceasefire now to prevent deadly, costly, catastrophic escalation of violence in the region.”

A number of Republicans also registered their approval of the stance taken by another Californian Democrat, Rep. Ro Khanna, who [expressed](#) with certitude the view that Biden had “to come to Congress before launching a strike against the Houthis in Yemen and involving us in another middle eastern conflict.” Republican Senator Mike Lee of Utah was [in full agreement](#), as was West Virginia Republican Rep. Thomas Massie

“Only Congress has the power to declare war,” Massie [affirmed](#).

Unfortunately for these devotees of Article I of the US Constitution, which vests Congress approval powers for making war, the War Powers Act, passed by Congress in November 1973, merely requires the president to inform Congress within 48 hours of military action, and the termination of such action within 60 days of commencement in the absence of a formal declaration of war by Congress or authorisation of military conflict. These days, clipping the wings of the executive when it comes to engaging in conflict is high impossible.

There was even less of a debate about the legality or wisdom of the Yemen strikes in Australia. Scandalously, and with a good deal of cowardice, the government preferred a deafening silence for hours in the aftermath of the operation. The only source confirming that personnel of the Australian Defence Forces were involved came from Biden, the commander-in-chief of another country. There had been no airing of the possibility of such involvement. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese had, in not sending a warship from the Royal Australian Navy to join Operation Prosperity Guardian, previously insisted that diplomacy might be a better course of action. Evidently, that man is up for turning at a moment's notice.

In a brief [statement](#) made at 4.38 pm on of January 12 (there was no press conference in sight, no opportunity to inquire), Albanese declared with poor conviction that,

“Australia alongside other countries has supported the United States and the United Kingdom to conduct strikes to deal with this threat to global rules and commercial shipping.”

He had waited for the best part of a day to confirm it to the citizenry of his country. He had done so without consulting Parliament.

Striking the Houthis would seem, on virtually all counts, to be a signal failure. Benjamin H. Friedman of *Defense Priorities* sees error piled upon error:

“The strikes on the Houthis will not work. They are very unlikely to stop Houthi attacks on shipping. The strikes’ probable failure will invite escalation to more violent means that may also fail.”

The result: policymakers will be left “looking feckless and thus tempted to up the ante to more pointless war to solve a problem better left to diplomatic means.” Best forget any assuring notions of taking the sting out of the expanding hostilities. All roads to a widening war continue to lead to Israel.

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