



Lemkin Institute Statement on the US-UK Bombing of the Republic of Yemen

Released on 19 January 2024

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention condemns the ongoing bombing by the United States and the United Kingdom of over 60 Ansar Allah targets at 16 locations in Yemen, which began on 12 January 2024. US and UK military engagement is a dangerous escalation of violence in the Middle East that risks drawing in increasing numbers of parties. The US government's redesignation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization similarly threatens to increase support for extremism across the region and to jeopardize humanitarian aid to Yemenis. We urge the United States and the United Kingdom to focus on their responsibilities under the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, push for a permanent ceasefire in Israel-Palestine, and work with partners in the Middle East to create the conditions for enduring peace and security for all peoples affected by the crisis.

According to the Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Saree, 73 strikes launched on 12 January killed five people and wounded six. The recent attacks, aimed at reducing Houthi capacity to target ships in the Red Sea, appear to have caused no casualties.

These strikes and the renewed terrorist designation are a distraction from the real crisis in the region, which is the ongoing genocide against Palestinians. The US and the UK are currently complicit in the genocide being perpetrated against Palestinians by the State of Israel. They should be concerned about their obligations to prevent genocide under the Genocide Convention and focus on stopping Israel's horrific bombardment and ground offensive in Gaza as well as its slower genocide against Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and on bringing all parties to the peace table to hammer out a just peace once and for all. Their blind support for

Israel stand in the way of peace and has been almost [universally condemned](#) outside of the Western world. The dangerous actions of these two Great Powers risk plunging the entire region into a wider conflagration, which would, in turn, risk drawing in powers outside of the Middle East, creating a global war.

The Houthis' [position](#) on their Red Sea attacks is that they are preventing ships affiliated with Israel from crossing the route in protest against the genocide in Gaza. The Houthis say their attacks are aimed at pressuring Israel to stop the genocide, which has [killed](#) nearly 25,000 people since October 7. The group's spokesperson, Mohammed Abdelsalam, [told](#) Al Jazeera on January 18 that "[w]e will not give up targeting Israeli ships or ships heading towards ports in occupied Palestine ... in support of the Palestinian people." The retaliatory attacks by the US and the UK have [brought](#) hundreds of thousands of people to Yemen's capital Sanaa to protest the Western use of force and to pledge solidarity with the Palestinian cause. One demonstrator [told](#) Agence France Presse, "[w]e're not scared of the American or British air force. We've been bombed for nine years and another attack is nothing new for us."

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [said](#) in a statement that U.S. and British forces carried out the strikes with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada, and the Netherlands. The aim, he said, was "to disrupt and degrade the Houthis' capabilities" after Houthi attacks have hobbled shipping in the Red Sea. The January 13 attack was [justified](#) by the US Central Command as "a follow-on action on a specific military target associated with strikes taken on January 12 designed to degrade the Houthis' ability to attack maritime vessels, including commercial vessels."

Since 14 November 2023, the Houthis have pursued a policy of area denial for Israeli-flagged vessels, which they expanded on 9 December 2023 to include all Israel-bound boats in the Gulf of Aden/Red Sea. In one instance, the Houthis hijacked a ship sailing under the Bahamian flag and took the multinational crew hostage, who are still held today. Predictably, this policy has garnered the condemnation of the Western world and drawn the ire of the United States, which has responded since mid-December with a [coalition of over 20 countries](#) to militarily engage Houthi partisans under the banner of [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#).

On 9 January 2024, the United Nations Security Council adopted [Resolution 2722 \(2024\)](#), which demands the Houthis “immediately cease all attacks, which impede global commerce and navigational rights and freedoms as well as regional peace” as well as the release of the crew of the *Galaxy Leader*. The [costs](#) of the Houthi attacks for global shipping and consumer prices are starting to be felt around the world, as the Red Sea accounts for 12 percent of the world’s trade.

[Ansar Allah](#), known colloquially as the Houthis, controls northern Yemen, parts of central Yemen, and much of the country’s Red Sea coast. The territory controlled by Ansar Allah encompasses two-thirds of the nation’s population, accounting for over 20 million people. Embroiled in civil war for nearly a decade, Yemen is divided between the Houthis, the Southern Transition Council (STC), and the internationally recognized Yemeni government. The STC is a separatist movement aiming to revive the defunct People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). The STC and its proxies are principally backed by the United Arab Emirates. Though it is “internationally recognized,” the nominal Yemeni government is the weakest of the three power holders in Yemen. Due to its close ties to Saudi Arabia and its lack of success in controlling inflation, the Yemeni government is largely viewed as illegitimate by the Yemeni people. Local warlords, armed groups, and popular support groups loosely control the more sparsely populated regions of Yemen.

Since 2022, a fragile peace has been in place between the Houthis, the Saudi-led coalition, and key parties in Yemen. During the same year, an anti-Houthi coalition formed between the STC and the Yemeni government; however, this Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) is wrought with rivalries and diverging interests. As such, the Council has made little headway in challenging the Houthis politically to this point. All parties to the near decade-long civil war in Yemen have [committed atrocities](#) and human rights violations, including but not limited to indiscriminate shelling, denying civilians access to food and water, and the use of child soldiers.

While the domestic Yemeni attitude toward Palestine is one of solidarity, the attacks on shipping lanes by Ansar Allah are likely calculated to achieve several goals. First, Houthi leadership likely hopes domestic support for their government will increase as it takes an aggressive stance against

Israel and the genocide in Gaza. Secondly, the control of critical shipping lanes also may increase the leverage it has in peace negotiations with Saudi Arabia (while US and UK strikes in Yemen could undermine Saudi Arabia's position). Lastly, the Houthis may also hope to raise their international clout and recognition by challenging Israel. Outside of South Africa's ICJ complaint against Israel, Houthi-led Yemen has taken the most aggressive stance against Israel's genocide in Gaza among all the countries of the world. In response to the airstrikes launched by the United States and the United Kingdom, which are supported by [Germany](#) but not by [France](#), Houthi leadership announced an expansion of ships it was targeting to include American and British vessels. On the morning of January 15, an American cargo vessel was struck by a ballistic missile off the coast of Yemen. The vessel reportedly suffered minor damage but is intact with no injuries to its crew.

While the deterrence of civilian ship traffic in international waters is illegal, and hostage-taking is deplorable, the Houthis are meeting might with might, using the resources they have at their disposal to counter the military arsenal that Israel, the US, the UK, and allied Western nations have unleashed on the Palestinian people. When genocide prevention fails, and international law is openly flouted, situations like we now have in the Red Sea are the predictable outcome, as the only other option is to watch a genocide unfold in silent horror. The Houthis actions amount to a de facto sanction policy enforced with violence in the form of hijackings and drone/missile strikes. While there are probably multiple motives for the Houthis to be laying siege to the Red Sea, the situation that has led to the expansion of US and British military enforcement into Yemen to ensure the free flow of goods and people through the Red Sea is the result of their ongoing, unflappable support for genocide. It also violates Yemen's sovereignty and threatens the fragile regional peace being fostered between Iran and Saudi Arabia that has given Yemeni people respite from nearly ten years of war. Moreover, an Iranian response in support of the Houthis has the potential to devolve into a wider conflict, which could draw the United States openly into the fray, a development that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sought for some time now.

It is imperative that the genocide in Gaza not spread conflict throughout the Middle East and imperil the pause in armed conflict between Yemen and Saudi Arabia that has allowed

humanitarian aid to reach vulnerable people. In the short term, the United States must pivot away from its blind support for Israel and pursue lasting peace in the region with Arab partners. At the very least, the United States must refrain from striking Houthi targets in Yemen and pursue a policy of non-interference in Yemeni affairs. The unpopularity of Western support for genocide in Gaza is [global](#). Expanding military action to countries posing resistance to genocide will only result in more suffering and predictable blowback. For its part, the UN must remain actively engaged in finding a long-term solution to the conflict in Yemen, one that centers Yemeni agency, human rights, and the representation of Yemen's people in their government.

The Biden Administration has made much of its diplomatic efforts to stop the spread of Israel's genocidal war. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken even cited this concern of as a reason to discount South Africa's genocide case against Israel in the International Court of Justice. He said during press availability on a visit to [Tel Aviv on 9 January 2024](#) that "[i]t's the reason we're working urgently to forge a path toward lasting peace and security in this region. We believe the submission against Israel to the International Court of Justice distracts the world from all of these important efforts. And moreover, the charge of genocide is meritless." It is important that the Administration remain consistent in its opposition to regional war.

The path to peace in the Middle East will not be forged through Israel's genocide or Western bombing campaigns, as the last twenty years of US policy in the Middle East has demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt. The United States, which has [disengaged from real efforts at peace](#) in Israel-Palestine over the past years only to give genocide its disastrous full-throated approval in October 2023, is late to the table with its disingenuous [calls](#) for a "road to lasting peace and security in the region." The airstrikes against the Houthi show that the United States has learned nothing from the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 and [blowback](#) to its flouting of international law since then. We call on smarter, cooler heads in the United States to pursue a path to peace that begins with a ceasefire in Gaza, the reigning in of the genocidal state of Israel, political negotiations towards the dismantling of settler colonialism in Palestine, and the creation of a true "road to lasting peace and security" through the hard work of peacebuilding and transformative justice.