

**Statement by U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen Timothy A. Lenderking**  
**Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and**  
**Counterterrorism**  
**Hearing on Yemen and Red Sea Security Issues**  
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Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Young, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this invitation to speak with you about the situation in Yemen and the Administration's response to ongoing Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

Yemen is at a crucial moment. Reckless Houthi attacks are jeopardizing the very real accomplishments of multilateral diplomacy over the past three years. When President Biden appointed me Special Envoy for Yemen in 2021, he made clear that achieving a durable peace in Yemen was a top Administration priority. That has not changed, and there is tangible progress to point to. After more than 50 trips to the region over the past three years, I remain convinced that peace in Yemen is not only possible but also serves U.S. interests, those of our regional partners, and, of course, those of Yemenis themselves. The people of Yemen deserve to live without the war, hunger, and disease that have killed hundreds of thousands over the past decade.

Despite the Houthis' illegal and reckless maritime attacks, the April 2022 truce between Yemen's warring parties continues to hold. Violence inside Yemen remains at the lowest levels since 2015, and Yemen's humanitarian crisis, while still acute, is less severe than at its peak. Until the Houthis' escalation, average Yemenis were beginning to see a way back to stability.

We should not lose sight of these milestones, even as we necessarily degrade and destroy Houthi militant capabilities and condemn their attacks on civilian shipping. Our regional and international partners – the Saudis, Omanis, and Emiratis in particular – remain committed to the peace process in Yemen and continue to engage constructively. In December, UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg announced that the parties to the conflict had reached an understanding that would form the basis of a roadmap for peace in Yemen, including a durable ceasefire and an inclusive, Yemeni-Yemeni political process. We have strived for these goals, and the UN roadmap remains Yemen's best hope to for an end to the conflict and to avoid falling back into bloody civil war.

Yet, as we have all seen since October, the Houthis are throwing this progress away to serve their own self-interested political agenda, aligning with Iran, at the expense of the Yemeni people. Iran is equipping and facilitating Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. Credible public reports suggest a significant number of Iranian and Lebanese Hizballah operatives are supporting Houthi attacks from inside Yemen. A recent unclassified Defense Intelligence Agency report confirms the Houthis' use of Iranian missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct attacks across the Middle East. This must stop.

The Houthis risk killing mariners from many nations every time they launch an attack, which they have now done on more than 45 occasions. By attacking oil tankers and other ships carrying hazardous materials, they are accountable for environmental catastrophe in the Red Sea, which would destroy Yemen's fishing industry. The Houthis are exacerbating the suffering of their own people; on February 19, for example, they targeted a ship transporting essential grain and food destined for Aden and Hudaydah. By making maritime traffic through the Red Sea costly and dangerous, the Houthis are exacerbating economic and humanitarian conditions in Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia – countries with a combined population of more than 250 million people that rely on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden for critical imports, economic activity, and humanitarian aid.

These attacks on commercial vessels are acts of terrorism. The Houthis are not even adhering to their stated goals; they are mostly hitting ships with no connection whatsoever to Israel, with over 55 countries affected to date, and driving up the difficulty and cost of delivering humanitarian aid to people around the world – including, of course, to Yemenis themselves. Since November 19, when the Houthis seized the *MV Galaxy Leader* by force, they have held hostage 25 innocent sailors from five countries. The Houthis should release them immediately and unconditionally, and not behave like an armed militia.

Houthi hypocrisy becomes even clearer as we focus on their continued abuse of the human rights of the Yemeni people. Their detention facilities are filling up with political detainees. They are recruiting child soldiers and indoctrinating them in hate. They are blockading the city of Taiz, and they routinely restrict humanitarian access to civilians as a form of collective punishment. Don't take it from me. Ask the Yemeni people themselves.

In response to the Red Sea threat, the United States and our partners are employing a multi-pronged military, economic, and diplomatic strategy to raise the costs of continued attacks and shift the Houthi calculus.

As DASD Shapiro will describe in detail, the U.S. military has acted quickly and decisively to counter the Houthi maritime threat. We are mobilizing U.S. and partner assets to degrade and destroy their ability to continue their attacks. Our defensive strikes on Houthi missile and drone infrastructure are having a significant effect. Our interdictions have disrupted Iran's resupply of the Houthis and provided tangible evidence of Iran's continued support to the Houthis' maritime attacks. Operation Prosperity Guardian, a U.S.-led naval operation in the Red Sea with more than 20 likeminded partners, is defending navigational rights and freedoms. Operation Aspides, a complementary and significant EU naval effort recently announced, further bolsters our

collective ability to defend international vessels and makes clear that Red Sea security is a global concern.

In addition, on February 16 our designation of the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist – or SDGT – came into effect. The designation is a powerful means to hold the Houthis accountable for their actions through asset freezes and blocking of financial transactions while enabling the continued flow of humanitarian assistance and trade to the Yemeni people. The designation complements a series of targeted sanctions on individuals and entities facilitating Iranian financial assistance to Houthis. We understand the Houthis, despite their grandstanding, are keen to see the terrorist designation removed. What is more, SDGT ensures the Houthis cannot reap the benefits of a peace agreement while continuing their attacks.

The Administration chose to pursue the SDGT rather than a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation of the Houthis because we assessed that SDGT maximizes our ability to avoid unintended humanitarian impacts on Yemeni civilians through licenses and other mitigation measures. We will continue to assess these factors on an ongoing basis and adjust as needed.

We do not want the people of Yemen to suffer because of the Houthis' reckless behavior. For that reason, the U.S. government has taken significant steps to shield the Yemeni people from any adverse impacts this designation may have. During the 30-day implementation period between January 17 and February 16, the Departments of State and the Treasury, together with USAID, conducted robust outreach to stakeholders, including aid providers, financial institutions, insurers, importers, the diaspora community, and partners who are crucial to facilitating humanitarian assistance and the commercial import of critical commodities into Yemen. The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) at the Department of the Treasury also published five general licenses authorizing certain transactions related to the provision of food, medicine, and fuel, as well as personal remittances, telecommunications and mail, and port and airport operations on which the Yemeni people rely, in addition to a general license authorizing transactions for the official business diplomatic and consular missions. These newly issued general licenses are in addition to the pre-existing global general licenses issued in December 2022, which, inter alia, authorize certain transactions for the official business of the U.S. government, the United Nations and other international organizations, and certain activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In parallel to targeted military strikes and the terrorism designation, we are also working every diplomatic channel to speak with one global voice in condemnation of Houthi attacks. The Houthis desire to be viewed as a government, but they are violating international law and behaving like an armed militia with no respect for international norms. Building on strong and unanimous statements from the UN Security Council and G7, the United States mobilized a group of 44 states, including the entire EU, all NATO members, and key Indo-Pacific nations in

December to call out Houthi provocations in the strongest possible terms. On January 10, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2722, which demands a halt to these reckless attacks and affirmed the navigational rights and freedoms of vessels in the Red Sea. The Houthis seek legitimacy on the world stage, and the broad coalition of likeminded nations we have assembled makes clear the depth of their isolation. Every globally connected country stands to lose from Houthi attacks, including our strategic competitors.

These efforts are one component of a broader diplomatic strategy. Even as we degrade and disrupt Houthis capabilities, squeeze their terrorist financing, and shame them on the world stage, we must also seek diplomatic off-ramps to bring an end to these Houthi attacks. Let me be clear—we do not seek this confrontation, but we will respond to Houthi attacks. We are working multiple channels to make clear to the Houthis that the possibility of peace remains if they cease their attacks immediately. But with every missile launched, they run the risk of an even greater catastrophe that could doom the prospects of any agreement. We do not seek escalation or wider conflict in the region.

I remain hopeful we can preserve a diplomatic path forward, but the Houthis are harming their own people by putting off the peace process. The Houthis appear determined to continue their reckless course for now. Ultimately, peace in Yemen serves the interest of all Yemenis, just as it does those of our regional partners. The United States stands ready to support.

Thank you again for your invitation today, and I look forward to your questions.