

COMMENT

# The West must confront the Iran threat

The Houthi attacks on US and British warships form part of a pattern in which Tehran's proxies have directed fire on the West and its allies

TELEGRAPH VIEW 12 January 2024 • 10:00pm



Hate march: Houthi supporters rally after the British and American air strikes. Their placards say: 'Death to America, death to Israel, a curse on the Jews' CREDIT: YAHYA ARHAB/PA-EFE/Shutterstock

Since mid-November, the Iran-backed Houthi movement has been engaged in an escalating series of attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. On Tuesday, it chose to target British and American warships, and in doing so invited military retaliation. Late on Thursday night, the response came. British jets joined US forces in a series of 60 strikes across Yemen, seeking to hit drone and missile launch sites alongside air defence systems and ammunition warehouses.

US President Joe Biden said the strikes were a “direct response” to “unprecedented” attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, and stated that he “will not hesitate” to authorise further action should Houthi aggression continue.

Rishi Sunak and President Biden have made the right decision in responding to force with force. The usual voices on the Left are already bleating about the West's military record in the Middle East, but it is entirely wrong to draw comparisons between Thursday's limited operations and the interventions in Libya or Iraq.

Britain and the US have entered this theatre with a clear and achievable set of goals. Evidently, part of the objective was to degrade the Houthis' ability to interfere with global shipping. But Thursday night's operations were also effectively a warning; should the

militants continue with their military operations against maritime trade, then the airstrikes and missiles may well continue to come, too.

But it would be a mistake to view the events in Yemen as somehow isolated from what is happening in the wider Middle East. The Houthis are just one of several terrorist groups – also including Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon – that Iran has cultivated in recent years in order to achieve its malign ambitions.

It is this destabilising influence that the West currently lacks a concrete strategy for confronting. The Houthi attacks on US and British warships form part of a pattern in which Iranian proxy groups have directed fire on the West and its allies, sometimes with little obvious response.

While in an interview with *The Telegraph*, the Defence Secretary Grant Shapps has strong words for the Iranian regime, it was notable that Mr Biden was unwilling to name Tehran in his own statement. This would seem to continue a disappointing pattern of weakness; groups acting with Iran's blessing have launched an estimated 120 attacks against US forces in Iraq and Syria since early October, resulting in injuries to 60 US personnel. The Biden administration has appeared fearful of retaliating too harshly. It has spent years attempting to bring Tehran back to the table, seeking to revive the failed Obama-era nuclear deal, approving prisoner swaps, and releasing frozen assets to the regime. The fruits of this effort to de-escalate tensions are now clear.

Britain, too, has played its role in this process, refusing to proscribe Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps despite the British security services preventing 15 attempts by Iran to kidnap or murder UK nationals (or people living here) in recent years.

The result of this tolerance has been an emboldened Iran that continues to creep towards nuclear readiness, engaging in missile testing and discussing collaboration with Moscow on the design of weaponry.

Its proxies are causing carnage across the region, and the funds exempted from sanctions by the US – the latest batch came to some \$10 billion – are providing the foreign currency necessary to fund this violence. Houthi militants, for instance, are believed to be paid \$100 each month by Tehran. Where does the White House think this money is coming from?

This record of weakness made it even more important that, in this case, the UK and US acted firmly. Indeed, it would have been disastrous for the West's reputation, in the Middle East and beyond, had the Houthi militants been allowed to get away with it. Britain and America are still living with the consequences of their failure to strike the Assad regime in 2013 – the Syrian dictator had been told that the use of chemical weapons would invite a military response, but none was forthcoming.

This is a potentially dangerous moment. The Houthis have vowed revenge, and it is possible that Iran will escalate its proxy war against the West. Tehran must be left under no illusions that any further outrages committed against British and American interests will be met with a strong and immediate response.

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