

## Yemen and the U.S. policy in the Middle East<sup>2</sup>

From mid-March 2025 the United States launched air strikes on the territories controlled by the Yemeni Houthis. Symptomatically the operation was first announced not by the Pentagon, but by the U.S. President Donald Trump personally on his online page *Truth Social*<sup>3</sup>. The American leader promised<sup>4</sup> the Houthis that “...hell will rain down upon you like nothing you have ever seen before”. However, a month after the launch of unprecedented air raids on Sanaa, the Iran-allied Yemeni Shiite movement *Ansar Allah* (*Ansarallah*) is still confidently standing on its feet and even carrying out fairly successful retaliatory actions.

On March 18, 2025, this insurgent movement attacked the Israeli military base at Nevatim with a “*Palestine 2*” hypersonic ballistic missile. Despite Israeli statements that the missile was intercepted before approaching the Jewish state border, Yahya Sariya, a representative of the *Ansar Allah* movement, confirmed that the strike reached its target. On the same day, Israel's Ben-Gurion International Airport was hit by a ballistic missile.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, Shiite rebels initiated massive missile and kamikaze drone attacks on the main vessel of the U.S. Carrier Strike Group, the aircraft carrier *USS Harry S. Truman*, off the coast of Yemen. According to *Al-Masirah*, this aircraft carrier group was subjected to 10 similar attacks by the Houthis in March alone<sup>6</sup>. Despite the fact that there is no reliable evidence of the successful defeat of the American warships by the Houthis, the U.S. fleet in the Red Sea is under great strain and is constantly expending hundreds of millions of US dollars worth of ammunition to defend itself.

This fact indicates that the tactics of the Yemeni rebels are aimed at creating conditions for maximum costs for the American defense budget, which may lead to a revision of Washington's plans for an anti-Yemen military campaign in the near future. The same applies to the Houthis' actions against Israel. In the first decade of April, the Houthis again initiated at least 2 attacks on Tel Aviv with ballistic missiles, significantly increasing the load on Israel's resources to deter air attacks.

Thus, the predictions of many international experts that the United States will not succeed through a “*remote warfare*” quickly crush the Houthi resistance and destroy their

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<sup>2</sup> The original article (in Russian) was submitted to the Editorial office on 17.04.2025.

<sup>3</sup> “US carries out airstrikes against Houthi rebels in Yemen after Trump orders”. BBC NEWS (in Rus.), 15.03.2025, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cp8l1g53z8wo/> (download date: 10.04.2025).

<sup>4</sup> <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114167864888304754> (download date: 10.04.2025).

<sup>5</sup> “The Houthis announced the launch of a hypersonic missile at Ben Gurion Airport”. PBN (in Rus.), 20.03.2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/20/03/2025/67db8d4a9a79475877bbc4bd/> (download date: 11.04.2025).

<sup>6</sup> “It became known how many times the Houthis hit the aircraft carrier Harry Truman in March”. Gazeta.ru, 03.30.2025, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2025/03/30/25432436.shtml/> (download date: 11.04.2025).

defense potential. Washington realized this quite quickly when, after the first most destructive raids, the Houthis did not lose their ability to consistently launch missiles and perform other attacks on the enemy. The fact that the powerful resistance of *Ansar Allah* was quite unexpected for the United States is evidenced by the contradictory statement of D. Trump dated March 27, 2025, in which he assured that the Houthi leadership was already looking for contacts with the Americans to conclude a peace deal, but at the same time promised that the power of the attacks by the U.S. Army would only increase and the operation would drag on for a long time. As the subsequent events showed, *Ansar Allah* did not ask for a truce, and the intensity of American bombing began to decline in April. The bunkers deliberately prepared by the Houthis in the northern mountainous part of Yemen were beyond the capabilities of the American aircrafts, and the rebels' missile arsenals and main command posts were not significantly damaged. The United States also failed to organize an effective naval blockade of Yemen and block delivery routes for missiles, explosives and other weapons to the Houthis. Experts agree that in order to achieve its goals, the USA will not be able to achieve its goals without a land invasion and the involvement of allies in such an operation<sup>7</sup>.

In early April 2025, some unnamed sources from the Pentagon informed that the United States was disappointed with the results of the aerial bombing of Yemen and was working on a plan to conduct a ground campaign relying on the Saudi Arabian army. Thus, Riyadh will again have to repeat its negative experience of the anti-Houthi war, which officially began in 2015<sup>8</sup>. Then *Ansar Allah* successfully resisted a coalition consisting of the Arab monarchies, Egypt, Sudan and the United States, which was unable, even with complete dominance in the air and sea, as well as with an overwhelming numerical superiority of ground forces, to defeat the rebel army. Given this experience, the question arises what innovations the United States is counting on in a new campaign to defeat the “rebels”. Perhaps Washington is placing its main bet on the ground formations of the Yemeni government forces, which, according to international media reports, consisting of 80,000 fighters, will have to recapture the Hodeidah Governorate, located on the coast of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, from the Houthis. However, the success of these plans is extremely doubtful, given that at one time the most combat-ready units of the Yemeni government army went over to the side of the Houthis, and Aden is not able to ensure the success of the ground operation on its own. During the first campaign, Yemeni government forces also played an important role, but they were defeated, which forced Washington to radically reconsider the advisability of further continuation of hostilities. In fact, the United States then admitted its failure and curtailed the program announced jointly with Saudi Arabia to eliminate the Shiite movement and subordinate the territories under its control to the internationally recognized Government of Yemen. On February 16, 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department, with the approval of President

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<sup>7</sup> Andrey Ryzhenko, “The Eternal Shah: Why the US operation against the Houthis will have limited effect”. TACC (in Rus.), 02.04.2025, <https://tass.ru/opinions/23577505/> (download date: 12.04.2025).

<sup>8</sup> “Air strikes did not lead to success: the United States does not rule out a ground operation against the Yemeni Houthis”. Военное обозрение (in Rus.), 07.04.2025, <https://topwar.ru/262563-udary-aviacii-k-uspehu-ne-priveli-ssha-ne-iskljuchajut-provedenija-nazemnoj-operacii-protiv-jemenskih-husitov.html/> (download date: 13.04.2025).

Joe Biden, removed the *Ansar Allah* organization from the *List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations* with the wording: “...the U.S. Department of State has revoked the *Ansarallah* designations which has resulted in *Ansarallah* no longer being blocked pursuant to the *Global Terrorism Sanctions Regulations*, 31 C.F.R. part 594, the *Foreign Terrorist Organizations Sanctions Regulations*, 31 C.F.R. part 597, or *Executive Order 13224*, as amended”<sup>9</sup>.

J. Biden’s decision turned out to be a productive measure, since it saved Saudi Arabia from threats to its oil production sector and energy infrastructures, which were constantly under attack from the Houthis. Egypt also benefited greatly, as the Houthis stopped obstructing maritime transport through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. The section of the world economy directly related to sea freight from South Asia and East Africa to Europe also breathed freely.

In turn, *Ansar Allah* was satisfied with the actions of Joe Biden’s administration not only because of the lifting of sanctions against Sanaa and the exclusion of the Houthis from the “terrorist list” but also, and most importantly, due to attempts to pursue a balanced policy regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This was due to the fact that the Democrats in power in the United States began to put strong pressure on Tel Aviv, which, using the unlimited support of D. Trump during his first term, sharply radicalized its position on the Palestinian issue. The administration of J. Biden practically issued an ultimatum to the Jewish state demanding a departure from maximalist demands on the Palestinian track, otherwise promising to leave Israel without traditional political support in the international arena. Washington strongly recommended Israel to come to terms with the “two states” formula – the only thing, in its opinion, that guarantees peace and security in the region<sup>10</sup>. This approach of the U.S. Democrats could not leave the Houthis indifferent, essentially the only organized force in the Islamic world that provides the Palestinian people and, in particular, the Gaza administration with real military support within its geography. Therefore, it is natural that the Houthis, who generally enjoy a reputation for being marginalized in the international arena, have developed surprisingly smooth relations with Biden’s Administration – as good as the conditions of international politics and law allow. Washington had every reason to believe that the curtailment of aggressive actions against the Yemeni rebels would only strengthen the U.S. influence in a complex region. It has increased, despite the already significantly undermined authority of the American military, led by a vast international coalition that has failed to eliminate the Houthi movement. President J. Biden’s administration, not without reason, believed that *Ansar Allah* was a fully negotiable organization, and did not lose this conviction even after the Houthis announced in November 2023 that, in response to the Israeli aggression in Gaza, they were ready to block the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea again and begin shelling the territory of the “Zionist regime”.

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<sup>9</sup> Revocation of Counter Terrorism General Licenses; Counter Terrorism Designations Removal and Updates; Yemen-related Designations Updates | Office of Foreign Assets Control, <https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20210216> (download date: 15.04.2025).

<sup>10</sup> “Biden told Abbas he was committed to a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict”. TACC (in Rus.), 15.05.2025, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/11382161/> (download date: 15.04.2025).

The Houthis' adequate behavior is evidenced by the fact that *Ansar Allah* officially voiced its threats only after it became known that Israel does not intend to limit itself to a counter-terrorism operation against *Hamas*. Instead, Israel has set the goal of annihilation of the entire Gaza conglomerate and its population. This strategic decision by the Houthis exemplifies a prudent policy, as evidenced by their commitment to restrict maritime passage into the Red Sea exclusively to vessels bound for Israel, regardless of their nationality. An attack on such vessels was planned only for the case that Gaza, grappling with profound economic hardship, failed to receive the necessary provisions of food and medicine. This condition was not met, and therefore, from the beginning of December 2023, *Ansar Allah* initiated military operations to neutralize Israel's supply routes.

It can be assumed that the Houthis' clearly formulated motivation for their actions and their balanced position were based on the desire to maintain a dialogue with the United States and demonstrate to the world community that *Ansar Allah* adheres to the philosophy of international law and makes absolutely legitimate demands on Israel and its allies. The Houthis' argumentation was characterized by a win-win scenario and more likely resembled the position of a full-fledged subject of international law rather than a terrorist organization, which *Ansar Allah* is generally considered to be in the world.

The Houthis put the humanitarian issue at the forefront of their anti-Israeli policy and consistently defended it in practice, despite the vague and contradictory actions of the same Arab and Islamic countries that did not dare to oppose Israel. This is what helped the United States, among other things, to a certain extent turn the Houthi factor into an additional tool of pressure on Israel. Thus, Washington maintained a dialogue with the Houthis even after the Yemeni rebels, having become convinced of Tel Aviv's reluctance to stop the violence in Gaza, initiated more radical measures to block the Red Sea, causing multibillion-dollar damage to the global economy. The U.S. State Department, of course, tried to convince the top of the Yemeni rebel movement to curtail the anti-Israeli confrontation and limit "*hostile actions*" in the Red Sea, but things did not go beyond persuasion and threats. The Biden Administration was categorically against a large-scale military operation against the Houthis (in January 2021, the United States carried out a limited air strike on a number of targets in Yemen), and did not even agree to Tel Aviv's demands to reclassify *Ansar Allah* as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The only thing that the Democrats agreed to under the pressure from the UN was their agreement to include the Houthis on the global list of terrorists (*Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT)*). The White House under the Democrats considered maintaining dialogue with the Houthis to be a serious foreign policy asset, helping, on the one hand, to exert some pressure on Israel on the Palestinian issue, and on the other, to create the ground for weakening *Ansar Allah*'s ties with Iran and the possible subsequent withdrawal of the Houthis from the "*Shiite axis*".

It is obvious that the Trump Administration did not appreciate this asset. Republicans rejected the Democrats' ambivalent policy towards the Houthi rebels and chose the path of increasing pressure on them. Immediately after being elected to his second presidential

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<sup>11</sup> "Yemen's Houthis have said they will obstruct the passage of ships heading to Israel". TACC (in Rus.), 09.12.2023, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/19498971> / (download date: 15.04.2025).

term, D. Trump signed a decree on January 23, 2025, re-incorporating *Ansar Allah* into the FTO<sup>12</sup>. This step was not at all hindered by the fact that just hours before the decree of the American president, *Ansar Allah*, through the mediation of Oman, released the sailors of «*Galaxy Leader*» cargo ship captured in November 2023 in the Red Sea, that was navigating under the Bahamas flag and was associated with the business activities of the Israeli billionaire Abraham Ungar<sup>13</sup>. Obviously, by doing so, the Houthis sought to demonstrate to the D. Trump's Administration their ability to negotiate and their readiness for a constructive dialogue, but Washington did not respond to this message. The next step to initiate a large-scale war against the Houthis was already predicted, and therefore *Ansar Allah*, without waiting for the start of the American operation, began intensive preparations for defense in January 2025.

Most experts are inclined to believe that D. Trump does not want to consider the Houthis as an independent factor, as his presidential predecessor did, and therefore considers the military operation against the Movement as part of a global campaign against Iran. Reluctance or inability to differentiate between the Houthis and the Iranians “*military-political regime*” is one of the main problems of Trump's team, which could negatively affect the White House's plans for “lightning-fast” destruction of the “*Shiite axis of resistance*”.

There is a widespread misconception in the West that *Ansar Allah* is an Iranian proxy group, similar to *Hezbollah* in Lebanon or *Kataib Hezbollah* in Iraq. Meanwhile, it would be more correct to consider that the Shia-Zaidi group, as the Houthis are also called, is an ally of Iran, but not its proxy. *Ansar Allah* was formed absolutely independently on the basis of intra-Yemeni political processes and, according to informed circles, it entered into a forced rapprochement with the theocratic regime of Iran, mainly due to the lack of other potential allies in the region.

Zaydi Shiism, embedded in the ideological basis of the *Ansar Allah* organization, is a reformist movement within Islam. It exhibits a wide range of contradictions with both Sunni doctrine and Iranian Shiism, which is considered a classical branch of *Imami* teaching. Equally, the Zaydis have many ideological points of contact with the Sunnis, as well as, naturally, with general Shiite dogma. In this sense, the Zaydi Houthis should be considered Shiites only conditionally, as their reformist views do not accept the division of Islam into antagonistic teachings. That is why the Houthis treat Sunni Palestinians with great warmth, but they extremely do not accept Sunni Saudis because of their excessive passion for Salafism and other radical movements. Taking these factors into account, it is extremely mistaken to consider the Houthis to be a minor force in the Shiite world, obediently following in the wake of Iranian politics and serving its agenda.

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<sup>12</sup> “Trump signed an order returning the Yemeni Houthis to the list of terrorist organizations. Biden previously excluded them from there”. Meduza (in Rus.), 23.01.2025, <https://meduza.io/news/2025/01/23/trump-podpisal-ukaz-vozvrashchayuschiy-yemenskih-husitov-v-spisok-terroristicheskikh-organizatsiy-ottuda-ih-ranee-isklyuchil-bayden/> (download date: 15.04.2025).

<sup>13</sup> “The Houthis released the crew of a ship they captured in 2023”. Эхо Кавказа (in Rus.), 22.01.2025, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/husity-osvobodili-komandu-zahvachennogo-imi-v-2023-godu-sudna/33285177.html/> (download date: 15.04.2025).



According to a number of experts, in a broad sense, the Houthis are connected with Iran mainly by two circumstances. The rejection encompasses both the rejection of Israel and its right to exist, as well as the rejection of the imperialist policies of the West. These concurrences became the main bonds of the Iran–Houthi alliance, pushing to the background a lot of contradictions between the parties.

Thus, if the Democrats in power in the United States tried, if possible, to play on the Iranian-Houthi contradictions with the prospect of diplomatic termination of the “*Shiite axis of resistance*” then the Republicans under the leadership of D. Trump, through their actions, are again strengthening the platform for rapprochement between Tehran and Sanaa. The war against the Houthis, as perceived by Washington and Tel Aviv, obviously, cannot significantly weaken Iran, but it will further convince the Houthis of the need for fierce confrontation with the West, and therefore strengthen solidarity with Iran. Destroying the Houthi movement is a practically impossible task at the moment for the American military and its allies, given that to achieve such a goal, the Pentagon and the American economy will require maximum tension of forces, as in the case of Afghanistan, which cost the United States thousands of personnel losses, more than \$1 trillion, as well as reputational costs. The Houthi movement is no less self-sufficient than the *Taliban*, and is also motivated and focused on the ideological component of the struggle. Given Trump’s flawed strategy, it naturally transforms into Iran’s first line of global defense, which the U.S.-led coalition might overcome, but only at the cost of significant losses.

It seems quite convincing that D. Trump’s populist decision to engage in a large-scale war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen is a result of his commitment to the Netanyahu government’s radical policies in the Middle East. The primary subjects under discussions are the Palestinian problem and the future of the Gaza Strip. It is the reluctance of the current administration in Washington to deviate from the Israeli concept of destroying the Gaza Strip and relocating its residents. This has compelled the United States to start a difficult and unpredictable war with the Houthis, and subsequently with Iran. Meanwhile, the goal of establishing peaceful navigation in the Red Sea and stopping the Houthi shelling of Israel, which D. Trump announced that the main motives for a new war could be achievable if Tel Aviv softens its positions on the Palestinians. The temporal coincidence of the agreement on the first stage of the truce in Gaza, which came into force on January 19, 2025, with the leaders of *Ansar Allah* official statement about their readiness to cease all attacks on Israeli and other ships in the Red Sea if all the declared stages of the truce are implemented<sup>14</sup>. As proof of its intentions, *Ansar Allah* did noticeably reduce its activity in the Red Sea until Israel itself violated the truce at the conclusion of the initial phase.

Consequently, in the context of the Houthi issue, the Democrats in the United States rightfully has been accused by D. Trump of two fundamental mistakes. Firstly, it is evident that he is aligning himself with the radical factions within the Israeli cabinet, who do not take into account the consequences of violent actions in Gaza. This stance fundamentally precludes the prospect of achieving peace with *Ansar Allah* through diplomatic methods.

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<sup>14</sup> “The Houthis have named a condition for stopping attacks on ships in the Red Sea”. PБК (in Rus.), 20.01.2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/20/01/2025/678eb0479a7947ea31d25cba/> (download date: 15.04.2025).

Secondly, D. Trump's estimation of the capabilities of the U.S. military is excessively optimistic. Subjectively, the military is incapable, effectively carrying out a campaign to eliminate the Yemeni rebel movement in a short time, even taking into account the presence of allies from Arab countries. Trump's critics point to the fact that the ongoing war against the Houthis will inevitably drag on, giving Iran the opportunity to mobilize its military forces and perhaps even successfully complete its program to develop its first nuclear warheads. And today Washington is simply unable to wage a successful war on two fronts simultaneously — both with the Houthis and the Iranians — despite the frequent declarations of military readiness made by the White House.

In turn, Tehran and Sanaa have demonstrated a keen understanding of this circumstance. They tend to believe that the eccentric D. Trump, in accordance with his typical approach, prematurely has taken a maximalist step. This is evidenced by his ongoing confrontation with the Yemenis and the issuance of a two-month ultimatum to Iran<sup>15</sup>. If we assume that after this period has elapsed with no agreement reached with Tehran to initiate the process of peace negotiations, it is imperative that Washington launches a large-scale campaign in the Iranian direction without first completing the Yemeni campaign. This course of action is not available for the U.S. Abandoning the Yemen campaign will pose a significant threat to D. Trump's reputation, given his promise to *"burn the Houthi movement in flames"*. Consequently, Tehran has every reason to doubt the sincerity of the words of U.S. Special Envoy Steve Witkoff that Washington is *"ready to compromise on Iran's nuclear program"*<sup>16</sup>. The aforementioned statement by the senior American diplomat, voiced in an interview to *The Wall Street Journal* on April 11, 2025, was in fact done more than a month before the expiration of D. Trump's ultimatum, thereby prompting Tehran reason to think that the United States is facing obvious problems in Yemen. So, from the Iranian perspective, the Americans are intended by the statements of readiness for compromises with Iran, to "deactivate" the categorical wording of the ultimatum to Iran and to stretch out the duration of negotiations as long as the military operation against the Houthis will require.

It is no coincidence that in the same interview, given on the eve of the meeting of the American and Iranian delegations in Oman on April 12, 2025, Witkoff asserted that the parties had nowhere to rush. In his words, *"the initial meeting with the Iranian delegation is dedicated to building trust"*, given the present necessity for the United States and Iran to record their mutual desire to reach an agreement, and not to discuss *"exact conditions"* at this stage.

Such a radical change of Washington's narrative may indicate that the Houthi defenses withstood the first *"crushing blows"* of the American bombing campaign, and the Pentagon has therefore asked the White House and State Department for additional time to complete the operation against the Houthis, which may include a ground component, before starting a large-scale war with the Islamic Republic. However, the central question is that if Tehran accepts the "game of prolonging negotiations", will this not lead to Iran having time to

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<sup>15</sup> "Trump delivers nuclear ultimatum to Iran". TRT World (in Rus.), 20.03.2025, <https://trt.global/russian/article/611495b10fd1/> (download date: 15.04.2025).

<sup>16</sup> "The United States is ready to compromise on Iran's nuclear program, Witkoff said". PIA NEWS (in Rus.), 11.04.2025, <https://ria.ru/20250411/iran-2010817232.html/> (download date: 15.04.2025).

acquire its first nuclear warheads in the interim? According to experts, this possibility is now extremely high, since this is evidenced not only by the signals of the Israeli intelligence services, which have traditionally misinformed the world community since 2015, but also by French and British intelligence officers, who have refuted Tel Aviv's statements in the past <sup>17</sup>. In addition, there is every reason to expect that even if a moratorium on Tehran's supply of weapons to the Houthis is introduced during the U.S.-Iranian negotiations, the United States will not be able to completely cut off all supply channels to the *Ansar Allah* organization. The fact is that since the previous year, the USA has suspected China and Yemen neighboring country Oman of supplying the Houthi rebels with missiles and spare parts for various types of weapons, but so far they have been unsuccessfully trying to block these channels using various methods<sup>18</sup>.

Thus, the armed conflict with the Houthis, even with Iran's passive position or the constraint of its actions, turns into a big problem for the United States, on which the image of President D. Trump will balance both among allies in the Middle East, as well as globally. Additionally, it will have implications for the domestic political field of the United States. Perhaps Washington was counting on the fact that against the backdrop of obvious slippage in the Ukrainian issue and the Palestinian-Israeli issue, complications in U.S. relations with Europe and neighboring countries on the American continent, as well as trade and sanctions wars initiated by the White House, the anti-Houthi campaign could be easily monetized into the first tangible asset in D. Trump's foreign policy portfolio. However, the course of events shows that the Houthi movement is not the easiest target for restoring U.S. image. Moreover, it may become the first tangible failure in D. Trump's nascent foreign policy doctrine.

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<sup>17</sup> "France predicted the possible date for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons". РБК (in Rus.), 30.11.2024, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/30/11/2024/674a9f749a794760381a9dcd/> (download date: 15.04.2025).

<sup>18</sup> "The US has imposed sanctions on companies from China and Oman for supplying the Houthis". Pioneerprodukt.by (in Rus.), 06.18.2024, <https://pioneerprodukt.by/economic/ssha-vveli-sankcii-protiv-kompanii-iz-kitaya-i-omana-za-postavki-khusitam.html/> (download date: 15.04.2025).