

WIDENING WAR: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE GAZA WAR GOING BEYOND ISRAEL-PALESTINE

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A U.S. strike on Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi militants in the Red Sea while they were attacking a container ship is the latest sign that the [Gaza war is widening beyond Israel-Palestine](#). Three Houthi boats were sunk and [10 militants killed in a rare close combat with the rebels](#) who control much of Yemen. The Houthis say that to express solidarity with the Palestinians, they would continue to attack commercial vessels passing through the [Bab el-Mandeb Strait](#), through which the Red Sea opens into the Gulf of Aden. Since late November, at least 20 commercial tankers have come under [Houthi attacks](#), including a chemical vessel off the Indian coast, forcing some of the world's largest shipping companies, including Maersk, Hapag-Lloyd and MSC, to [suspend trading on the Red Sea](#) routes, and use the circuitous route around Africa. Traffic through the Red Sea, a crucial link between the Mediterranean and the Arabian Seas through the Suez Canal, has dropped by some 35% in recent weeks, increasing shipping and insurance costs. The crisis has prompted the U.S. to announce a new naval task force to ensure security in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

But the [U.S.'s attempt to deal with the Houthi threats](#) as a stand-alone security crisis might run into its own limitations. No Red Sea basin country has joined the U.S.-led task force, which includes even Egypt, whose economy has taken a hit due to the drop in the Suez traffic. This shows the growing anger in the Arab world towards the Biden's administration's unconditional support for [Israel's offensive in Gaza](#), which has killed at least 22,000 people in 11 weeks. The Houthi control of Yemen's Red Sea Coast, including the port of Hodeidah, which is some 250 km north of the Bab el-Mandeb, just 29 km wide at its narrowest point, gives them a natural advantage in carrying out sea denial attacks in and around the Strait. Over the past few weeks, the U.S. has shot down several Houthi missiles and drones over the Red Sea. But that has not stopped the Houthis from launching new attacks. Even if the U.S. carries out airstrikes in Yemen, it is not clear whether aerial attacks could deter the Houthis, who survived intense Saudi bombing for seven years. Beefing up security in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea has now become inevitable, but the U.S. should first work towards achieving a ceasefire in Gaza, addressing the core issue behind the escalation. That would help Washington build a regional consensus against the Houthis. But if the U.S. turns a blind eye towards the indiscriminate killing of Palestinians by its ally and stays focused only on the Houthis, it risks getting dragged deeper into a widening regional conflict.

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