



● NATALIA SHULGA/AL JAZEERA



People demonstrate against the United States entering a war with Iran on the East Front of the US Capitol in Washington, United States, on January 9, 2020. Later, the House adopted a war powers resolution with the aim of limiting President Donald Trump's military actions against Iran during his first term in office.
● SARAH SILBINGER/GETTY IMAGES

Yes, Iran can sink American aircraft carriers



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OPINION

Any conflict with Iran will drastically increase the chances that an American carrier is either grievously damaged or sunk in an engagement.

Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh was recently interviewed while attending a prayer service in Tehran — shortly after US President Donald Trump threatened the Islamic Republic with severe consequences if they did not abandon their alleged quest for nuclear weapons. According to Hajizadeh, "The Americans have at least 10 military bases in the region surrounding Iran, housing around 50,000 troops." Any normal aerospace commander would likely be fazed by such a hostile presence. Yet Hajizadeh speculated that the United States' abundance of forces in the region weakened it rather than strengthening it. "This means they're sitting inside a glass house," he explained. "Someone sitting in a glass house should not be throwing stones at others." And Hajizadeh is correct.

Israel-Iran conflict's geopolitical context

US bases in and around the Mideast are under serious risk of massive Iranian retaliation.

But the fact remains that, if they decided to, both Israel and the United States could likely decimate Iran's nuclear facilities, dealing a real blow to Iran.

Yet while the Americans have certain significant advantages over the Iranian regime, the IRGC commander is correct when cautions America about the retaliatory capacity of Iran. The bases ringing Iran are conspicuous targets for such retaliation. But Iran could also go even further — sinking one of the two US Navy aircraft carriers currently deployed to the region, the USS Harry S. Truman and the USS Carl Vinson.

Houthis' threat to American carriers

Already, the Iran-backed Ansarullah (Houthi) fighters in Yemen have demonstrated a remarkable capability to threaten US aircraft carriers operating near their shores. Using increasingly sophisticated anti-ship ballistic missiles, the Houthis have been getting closer and closer to American carriers deployed to fight them. Over the last year, multiple reports have come out highlighting the intensity of the American conflict with the Houthis.

For instance, last year, US Navy Commander Eric Blomberg of the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Laboon described the dangers of his tour of duty against the Houthis as the toughest fighting the Navy has

experienced since the Second World War. "I don't think people really understand just how deadly serious it is what we're doing and how under threat [US Navy warships] continue to be," Blomberg explained to the Associated Press in June 2024.

And that was from an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer's commanding officer. Those destroyers provide cover for US aircraft carriers when operating as part of a larger aircraft carrier battle group. Even with these additional screens, Houthi anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs) have become so effective that, last year, a Houthi missile nearly clipped the flight deck of the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower.

That carrier just barely escaped devastation by a mere 656 feet (200 meters). That's far too close, especially considering that the Houthis are generally looked down on by Westerners as a pack of cave-dwellers. A more sophisticated foe, like China or Iran, could undoubtedly do far worse.

In the Red Sea, the intensity of combat operations is so significant that fear of Houthi activity indirectly caused the loss of an E/A-18G Growler going into the new year. The pilot and his weapons officer ejected to safety and were rescued without injury.

And within the last week, unconfirmed reports from the region claim that the Houthis opened fire upon the American

carrier on March 16 with drones and ASBMs that "hit" the carrier. The Navy denies this. But it is interesting to note that, shortly after the alleged attack, the Pentagon ordered the carrier to reposition itself just outside the range of Houthi weapons.

Recall that during the Eisenhower incident last year, Navy commanders vociferously denied that any Houthi ASBM came close to the carrier or even posed a threat...until they were forced to quietly concede that the Houthi missiles got within 656 feet of the carrier. Of course, "close" is subjective. Similarly, the Navy is vehemently denying that the Houthis ever posed a threat to the Truman on March 16. But if so, why would they then move the carrier backwards?

It doesn't really matter. All that does is that we know the tempo of Houthi operations against US Navy assets in their region is significant and that the ASBMs, in particular, pose a substantial enough threat to American flat tops that the Navy is keeping these assets at safe distances from Houthi launch sites.

Given that the Houthi missiles are made by the Iranians and IRGC elements trained the Houthi on how best to utilize these systems, it stands to reason that any conflict with Iran will drastically increase the chances that an American carrier is either grievously damaged

or sunk in an engagement.

Even if the Americans avoid such a terrible fate by keeping their carriers out of the range of Houthi and/or Iranian missiles, that move alone will significantly degrade the utility of the costly carriers. It will also reaffirm to ever-mindful China that their plan of using similar systems against American warships when — and if — they opt to attack Taiwan is the correct course.

America no longer dominates Middle East

Twenty years ago, American military dominance in the Middle East was assured. Today, the Houthis and their Iranian allies have crafted a sufficient enough capability that they could believably keep American carriers over the horizon, dramatically limiting their effectiveness. And if those carriers dared to move closer to the combat area, the Iranians could very credibly sink them.

Such a loss would be a devastating blow to America's psyche, which views its aircraft carriers as the ultimate symbol of American might. These platforms are highly sophisticated — and onerously expensive. If even one were destroyed or rendered combat-ineffective by Iranian ASBM attacks, the blow to America would be grave.

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The USS Harry S. Truman conducts flight operations in the US Central Command area of responsibility on March 27, 2025.
● US NAVY

