

# **Briefing Notes: Red Sea Escalation & Gaza – March 18, 2025**

**IDSF \ Research Division**

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**Briefing Notes**  
**Red Sea Escalation & Gaza – March 18, 2025**

On the night of March 18, 2025, two critical flashpoints converged in the Middle East, each carrying significant implications for U.S. policy and global stability. In the Red Sea, U.S. forces engaged in a dangerous standoff with Iranian-backed Houthi militias, supported by Chinese electronic warfare. Simultaneously, Israel intensified operations in the Gaza Strip to pressure for the release of hostages held by Hamas. The fold of the events underscore Iran's strategy of using proxies to destabilize the region while stalling in negotiations to advance its nuclear ambitions. They also highlight the evolving U.S. stance that holds Iran accountable for its proxies' actions, and the emerging concept of a large-scale population emigration from Gaza to the benefit of both sides.

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**1. Timeline of Key Events in the Red Sea (March 18, 2025)**

1. **Late Evening Missiles:** Houthi militias in Yemen launched a volley of missiles and drones toward the USS Harry S. Truman carrier group. U.S. naval defenses intercepted the majority, sustaining no major damage.
2. **U.S. Counterstrikes:** In response, the U.S. conducted targeted airstrikes on Houthi command centers inland. Intelligence suggests these sites were controlling missile and drone operations.
3. **Escalation Threat:** U.S. Central Command signaled potential expanded missions if the Houthis persisted. Houthi leaders vowed continued retaliation, raising alarms about a broader confrontation.

These events<sup>iii</sup> followed a weekend of tit-for-tat escalation: on March 15–16, the U.S. bombed Houthi infrastructure, prompting multiple retaliatory strikes. Observers note the high intensity of Houthi missile fire, raising suspicions of enhanced logistical or technological support—particularly from Iran and, indirectly, from China. Thus, the Red Sea, a vital global shipping lane, has effectively **become an active conflict zone overnight, with international commerce at risk** and oil prices already inching upward on news of the clashes.

**2. Chinese Involvement: Electronic & GPS Warfare**

Evidence from intelligence reports and allied naval monitoring points to **Chinese assistance** in Iranian and Houthi efforts. Radar interference, GPS jamming, and advanced drone coordination in the Red Sea suggest direct or indirect Chinese involvement.

- **Strategic Positioning:** China's naval base in Djibouti<sup>iii</sup> offers a forward platform for surveillance and electronic warfare, making it easier to gather intelligence on U.S. vessels.
- **Technological Edge:** Houthi militias traditionally lacked advanced targeting; the sudden spike in accurate strikes could stem from real-time data or jamming tools provided by Chinese assets.
- **Implications:** China's covert role challenges the U.S. Navy's freedom of operation, tests American missile defense systems under actual combat conditions, and might embolden further Iranian proxy aggression.

### 3. Trump's New Equation: Houthis = Iran

President Trump's stance – treating **any Houthi attack as a direct Iranian attack** – has altered U.S. policy<sup>iv</sup>. By erasing the distinction between Iranian proxies and Tehran itself, the U.S. seeks to:

- **Reinforce Deterrence:** Ensure Iran pays a direct price if the Houthis strike U.S. forces or allies.
- **Shift Burden of Responsibility:** Highlight that Tehran cannot hide behind nominally “independent” militias.
- **Increase Pressure on Allies and Rivals:** Urge European and regional partners to recognize Iran's hand in Houthi aggression and to unify against Tehran's destabilizing operations.

This new equation leads us to **new era in counterterrorism**, state-supporting terrorism (like: Iran and Qatar) cannot shield themselves from direct blame using loopholes in the international law, but will hold direct accountability for decades of their worldwide atrocities and crimes.

### 4. Gaza Escalation & Hostage Crisis

Alongside the Red Sea conflict, Israel launched large-scale airstrikes in Gaza on the night of March 18, targeting Hamas command structures after negotiations for releasing Israeli hostages stalled. 59 Israelis remain in Hamas custody from the October 7<sup>th</sup> (2023) invasion and massacre.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's cabinet authorized an intensified campaign to force Hamas to relinquish the hostages or face deeper military losses.

### 5. Pressure for Emigration from Gaza

U.S.A. President Trump proposed a plan to **facilitate mass emigration** from Gaza is still on the table as feasible plan. The rationale is to provide an “exit” for Gazans who wish to escape Hamas's rule, while robbing Hamas of the civilian population it uses as a shield.

In order to successfully carry out this plan, **international cooperation is of the essence**. The United States and Israel reportedly contacted several potential host countries to provide temporary shelter to refugees from Gaza Strip, within the framework of the shelter provided to refugees from Ukraine and Syria. This cooperation is crucial to safeguard civilians and keep them away from a hot war zone.

### 6. Strategic Significance & Policy Recommendations

1. **Maintain Robust Deterrence in the Red Sea:** Deploy additional naval assets, bolster missile-defense systems, and engage in consistent countermeasures against both kinetic & electronic warfare. Expose China's interference publicly and privately pressure Beijing to halt destabilizing activities.
2. **Hold Iran Accountable:** Expand economic sanctions targeting Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and nuclear infrastructure. Apply diplomatic measures to highlight Iranian responsibility for Houthi violence, leveraging Trump's doctrine that **proxy attacks equal Iranian attacks**.
3. **Tighten Negotiation Terms:** Adopt a hard line in nuclear talks, insisting on verifiable steps – such as the full halt of high-level uranium enrichment – before providing sanctions relief.

Prevent Tehran from exploiting diplomacy as a stalling tactic by setting clear deadlines and consequences.

4. **Coordinate International Action:** Work with European and Gulf partners to form a broad coalition that denies Iran and its proxies funding, arms, and political cover. Engage China through backchannel diplomacy to discourage its active support of Iranian operations.
5. **Address Gaza's Humanitarian & Security Needs:** Support efforts to free Israeli hostages via targeted pressure on Hamas. If exploring the emigration proposal, ensure transparent frameworks to ensure human rights and safe passage. Emphasize that all measures align with international law to preserve legitimacy.
6. **Public Diplomacy & Alliances:** Inform domestic and international audiences about the risks of Iranian expansionism and the reality of Hamas's terror tactics. Highlight evidence of Iranian and Chinese collusion in destabilizing the Red Sea. Align these messages across allied media channels to fortify public support for a proactive strategy.

### **The Broader Picture – Iran's Stalling Tactics**

Just before conclusion, let us take a step back from the important happenings of the March 18<sup>th</sup> events and pay attention to the bigger picture and the main game that played behind the scenes: **Iran's Stalling Tactics**. Iran's negotiation pattern involves using **diplomacy to buy time**, alongside smaller scale proxy warfare while continuing nuclear and missile programs in parallel. Historically, Tehran has:

1. **Delayed Talks** to forestall tougher international action.
2. **Maintained or Expanded** uranium enrichment in secret, occasionally breaching agreements once it gained technological or strategic advantages.
3. **Leveraged Proxies** (like the Houthis, Hezbollah, and Hamas) to attack U.S. or allied interests indirectly, sowing regional chaos that distracts from Iran's nuclear pursuits.

Reports confirm that Iran recently enriched uranium to near weapons-grade. This underscores the familiar pattern: Tehran signals limited openness to dialogue, all while **quietly advancing** nuclear and regional objectives. U.S. policymakers must recognize that negotiations are, for Iran, often a **tool of strategic delay**, not a pathway to lasting compromise.

### **Conclusion**

The events of March 18, 2025, underscore the **complex and interlinked threats** posed by Iran's regional aggression, its use of proxy forces (such as the Houthis), and the contentious situation in Gaza. Iran's pattern of stalling time from the real threat while advancing its nuclear and military capabilities raises the stakes for the Western World, who must prevent further destabilization without stumbling into a larger war. China's involvement in the Red Sea, by offering technological aid to Iran and the Houthis, also represents a direct challenge to Western power projection.

Meanwhile, Israel's deepening campaign in Gaza, from airstrikes to an emigration strategy, exemplifies the importance to resolve the hostage crisis and neutralize Hamas. These actions highlight the broader struggle to protect civilians while confronting brutal terror organizations.

The policy imperative is clear: adopt a resolute yet carefully managed approach that unites military strength with diplomatic firmness, preventing Iran from capitalizing on prolonged negotiations and holding it fully responsible for proxy violence. A coordinated, firm stance—backed by

intelligence, coalition-building, and robust defense—is essential to contain Iranian ambitions, counter terrorism, and ensure long-term regional stability. By acting decisively now, the United States, Europe and its allies can shape outcomes that prevent Iran’s nuclear breakout, uphold freedom of navigation, and protect lives across the Middle East and beyond.

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<sup>i</sup> Phillips, M. (2025, March 17). *Trump’s sights set on Iran after US airstrikes decimate more than 30 Houthi targets*. Fox News. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trumps-sights-set-iran-after-us-airstrikes-decimate-more-than-30-houthi-targets>

<sup>ii</sup> India, T. O. (n.d.). Iran-backed Houthis claim a third attack in 48 hours on US ships. *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/iran-backed-houthis-claim-a-third-attack-in-48-hours-on-us-ships/articleshow/119139167.cms>

<sup>iii</sup> Author, G. (2025, January 30). *Reconsider Red Sea risk: Revealing U.S. navy air and missile defense capability to China* | Center for International Maritime Security. <https://cimsec.org/reconsider-red-sea-risk-revealing-u-s-navy-air-and-missile-defense-capability-to-china>

<sup>iv</sup> Ali, I., Stewart, P., & Ghobari, M. (2025, March 17). *Trump vows to hold Iran responsible for Houthi attacks*. Reuters. Retrieved March 18, 2025, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-piles-pressure-yemens-houthis-with-new-airstrikes-2025-03-17>