

U.S. Partnership with the Yemeni National Resistance Forces to Secure the Red Sea and Stabilize Yemen

As the United States reassesses its regional strategy amid rising threats in the Red Sea and Yemen, the Yemeni National Resistance Forces (NRF) is a disciplined, legitimate, and operationally effective partner. Stationed at some of the region’s most geopolitically sensitive chokepoints, the NRF offers Washington a unique opportunity to bolster maritime security, contain Iranian influence, combat the Houthis, and restore allied confidence without U.S. military deployment.

Yemeni National Resistance Forces (NRF)

A formal military force of approximately 45,000 troops, the NRF operates within the internationally recognized state framework and under the umbrella of Yemen’s Presidential Leadership Council and Ministry of Defense.

The NRF includes specialized naval, intelligence, and combat units and are deployed along the western Yemeni coast from Bab al-Mandab to southern Al Hudaydah. The force enjoys broad national support and is affiliated with an active political bloc that holds 24 seats in the Yemeni Parliament. Unlike other factions, the NRF promotes a secular, nationalist agenda, opposing sectarianism, separatism, and extremism.

The forces are commanded by an ally of the United States: Brigadier General Tariq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, Vice President and member of Yemen’s Presidential Leadership Council.

Brigadier General Tariq Saleh

Following President Hadi’s resignation in April 2022, power transitioned to the eight-member PLC, with Rashad al-Alimi as President. Each member has equal executive authority. BG Saleh plays a central role as Vice President and participates in every strategic PLC meeting and engagement.

As Vice President, BG Saleh works with Yemen’s coalition government to advance the people’s priorities and combat the Houthis. He has met with U.S. officials, including U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Steven Fagin and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) officials. In November 2023, he met with then-U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking, U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Steven Fagin, and UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg alongside President Al-Alimi and other PLC members.



BG Saleh’s Nov. ’23 meetings with Special Envoy Lenderking, Ambassador Fagin, UN Special Envoy Grundberg, and others



Furthermore, BG Saleh has had multiple bilateral meetings with Amb. Fagin, including a meeting in January 2025 to discuss “countering Houthi threats” and “ways to support the Yemeni government’s efforts to restore peace and security for all Yemeni citizens.” BG Saleh has also met with leaders such as the UK Ambassador to Yemen, the President of Djibouti, and King Abdullah II of Jordan.

In addition to his military leadership, BG Saleh is a stabilizing figure in western Yemen’s civilian administration. He works closely with tribal leaders, governors, and national institutions in the Red Sea region, particularly around Mocha and Hays.

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The NRF: Washington's Ideal Partner

A U.S.-NRF partnership would build upon the great success of recent U.S. operations against the Houthis, support a locally-driven solution to ensure the enduring defeat of the Houthis and safeguard stability in Yemen and the region, and prevent further U.S. military engagement.

The NRF controls territory along one of the world's most critical maritime arteries, connecting the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. U.S. support to the NRF is an investment in global trade security and freedom of navigation. Since its 2018 deployment, the NRF has not lost any territorial ground. In May 2025, NRF Coast Guard units executed a high-profile operation intercepting an Iranian weapons shipment bound for Houthi forces. The operation was publicly praised by Ambassador Fagin and acknowledged by CENTCOM as a critical success in maritime security.

Additionally, the NRF is jointly supported by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the United States' primary Gulf allies, making the NRF a unique regional consensus platform to unify fragmented regional efforts under a coordinated U.S.-led strategic vision.



Strategic Benefits for the United States

With U.S. support, coordination, and intelligence sharing, the NRF could better combat the Houthis, secure the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab, disrupt Iranian arms trafficking, and build a sustainable, localized deterrence infrastructure. With targeted U.S. support, a renewed NRF campaign to liberate the remainder of Al Hudaydah Governorate would cripple Houthi maritime capabilities and deny Iran its last significant geographic foothold in southern Red Sea waters.

By providing support to the NRF, a legitimate and effective ground force, the United States can reshape the conflict's dynamics while avoiding escalation or direct military entanglement and strengthening a pro-Western actor with local legitimacy and battlefield credibility. A U.S.-NRF partnership would help the United States outflank Iran from the periphery (Yemen) in a more cost-effective and politically viable way than direct confrontation. Disarming the Houthis also reduces pressure for preemptive Israeli strikes and regional war escalation. Additionally, improving security in the Red Sea supports broader Middle East stability, including diplomatic openings through Abraham Accords momentum.

The Way Forward: Recommended U.S. Actions

1. Provide advice to the NRF to support a locally-driven solution to ensuring stability in Yemen and combating the Houthis.
2. Facilitate a high-level official visit to Washington, D.C., by BG Saleh and his political-military team.
3. Assign a U.S. military assessment team to jointly develop an operational security plan for Yemen's western coastline.
4. Provide direct technical and intelligence support for NRF maritime interdiction and counter-smuggling missions.
5. Coordinate trilateral support (U.S.-Saudi-UAE) to ensure a unified regional framework under U.S. strategic guidance.

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