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May 2025

Targeting Ras Isa

The Story from Above



Incident: U.S. airstrike on Ras Isa on the Red Sea

Date of Incident: April 2025 ,17

Casualties: 74 killed, 171 injured

Material Damage: Extensive destruction of the facility's infrastructure

Type of Attack: Aerial bombardment

Responsible Party: United States of America



Who are we?

SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties

SAM is an independent, non-profit Yemeni human rights organization that began its activities in January ٢٠١٦ and obtained a license to operate in December ٢٠١٧. The organization aims to document human rights violations in Yemen, work to stop violations through advocacy in partnership with local and international organizations, raise human rights awareness through societal rights development, and hold human rights violators accountable in Yemen in collaboration with international mechanisms and human rights organizations.

Introduction

In mid-April 2025, the Ras Isa oil terminal, located on Yemen's western coast, was subjected to airstrikes by U.S. forces as part of what Washington described as a "limited deterrence" operation against the Houthi group, accusing it of using the port for military purposes and funding its operations through its revenues. However, the attack, which resulted in dozens of civilian casualties, triggered widespread human rights condemnation and raised serious questions about its legal legitimacy, catastrophic economic consequences, and the broader implications of how the concept of a "military target" is being redefined in unconventional warfare.

Ras Isa Port is considered a vital economic artery in Yemen, particularly in Houthi-controlled areas, as it is a major entry point for fuel shipments that support healthcare, public services, and commercial sectors. The destruction of its infrastructure delivers a dual blow: first, to civilians now facing severe fuel shortages and sharp price hikes, and second, to the local economy, which relies heavily on this maritime gateway for trade and transport. Direct financial losses are estimated in the millions of dollars, while the repercussions extend to food security, transportation, and production sectors.

This investigation relies on the methodology of *Open Source Investigation*, involving the tracking and analysis of documented photos and videos, cross-referenced with satellite imagery, and verification of the timing and location of the strikes using digital verification tools, local sources, and media reports. It also examines the narratives of all involved parties, focusing especially on discrepancies between the official U.S. account, human rights reports, and testimonies from local residents, in order to provide a comprehensive and impartial picture.

Additionally, the investigation is grounded in legal analysis based on international humanitarian law, particularly the principles of *distinction* and *proportionality*, to assess whether the attack complied with the legal standards for protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure. It also considers the position of Yemen's internationally recognized government on these strikes, and the extent to which the operation aligned with the principle of sovereignty and non-intervention enshrined in the UN Charter.

The investigation aims to present a well-documented, accountable body of evidence that contributes to uncovering the truth for both domestic and international audiences. It also seeks to provide victims and concerned parties with legal advocacy tools, potential compensation claims, or avenues for accountability at a time when asymmetric wars risk undermining the law and turning civilian zones into open targets for airstrikes and reinterpretation.

Background and Developments

Since late 2023, the Houthi group has escalated its maritime operations in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait, targeting commercial vessels linked to the United States and Israel. The group framed these actions as a direct response to the war in Gaza and part of what it calls a “mutual deterrence” strategy. This escalation prompted the United States to form an international naval coalition to safeguard maritime navigation, and later to conduct direct airstrikes on Houthi sites in Sana’a, Hodeidah, and other regions starting in January 2024.

Within this volatile context, the April 17, 2025, strike on Ras Isa Port emerged as one of the most controversial attacks, as it targeted a civilian oil facility used to supply vast regions of Yemen with fuel. The strike was not isolated but part of a series of similar operations, including strikes on Sana’a airport, a power plant in Hodeidah, and locations alleged to be drone-launching bases. However, the targeting of Ras Isa marked a pivotal escalation, with multidimensional implications: *economic*, due to its importance in securing fuel; *humanitarian*, since the port is used by aid organizations as a transit point for relief supplies; and *legal*, because of the debate over whether the facility constitutes a legitimate military target.

The internationally recognized Yemeni government, effectively excluded from the decision-making process behind the military operation, issued a brief statement condemning the strikes and rejecting the use of Yemeni territory as a battleground for regional conflicts. On the other hand, the Houthis claimed the port had long been a target and accused Washington of attempting to strangle economic life in their areas of control.

This incident cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader context of shifting rules of engagement among local and international actors in Yemen, the growing influence of Iran in supporting the Houthi group, and the relative decline of the UN Security Council’s role in enforcing effective legal frameworks—opening the door to a legal vacuum that threatens the core of Yemeni sovereignty and civilian rights.

Location

On the evening of April 17, 2025, U.S. Central Command announced it had carried out airstrikes on a fuel platform at the Ras Isa terminal on the Red Sea. The terminal is [located](#) between the ports of Hodeidah and Al-Salif, approximately 57 kilometers north of Hodeidah Port. It is a natural harbor, separated from Kamaran Island by a strait about 2 kilometers wide.

The Airstrikes

U.S. Central Command [stated](#) that it had targeted a source of revenue for the Houthi group, which it designates as a foreign terrorist organization. According to the statement, the location provided the group with fuel, supported its military operations, and contributed to its economic resources.

Meanwhile, on the evening of April 17, 2025, the SABA News Agency, under the control of the Houthi group, [reported](#) that a series of U.S. airstrikes had targeted the Ras Isa terminal.

The strikes hit the facility's entrance gate, the tank area, various locations where fuel trailers were gathered, and the monitoring zone, as evidenced by satellite data showing the impact points of the airstrikes.



Satellite image showing the locations of the airstrikes that targeted Ras Issa

Casualties and Damage

The following day, the Ministry of Public Health and Population in the Houthi-run government [announced](#) that the airstrikes had resulted in 245 casualties, including 74 dead and 171 injured—mostly workers and staff at the terminal. This toll was described as preliminary.

Other government-affiliated sources [reported](#) 80 fatalities and 150 injuries.

Local sources stated that approximately 20 trailers—most of them gas tankers—were hit and caught fire during the bombardment. However, this figure has not been cited in any official sources, despite the days that have passed since the incident.

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According to verified photos and videos of the U.S. strike, the bombardment targeted the northern side of Ras Isa, in the direction of Al-Salif and Kamaran Island. Footage of the strike was [recorded](#) by sailors aboard nearby vessels—one of which was docked in Al-Salif—and posted as short clips on [Facebook](#) stories. One of the sailors, who is Syrian, filmed the moments of the attack.

We conducted a search for the vessel he was working on and found an image showing the ship's registration number. Upon investigation, it was confirmed to be the **FORZA ROMA**, which was docked in Al-Salif in a position that would have allowed the sailor to witness and film the attack—thus verifying the authenticity of the circulated footage.

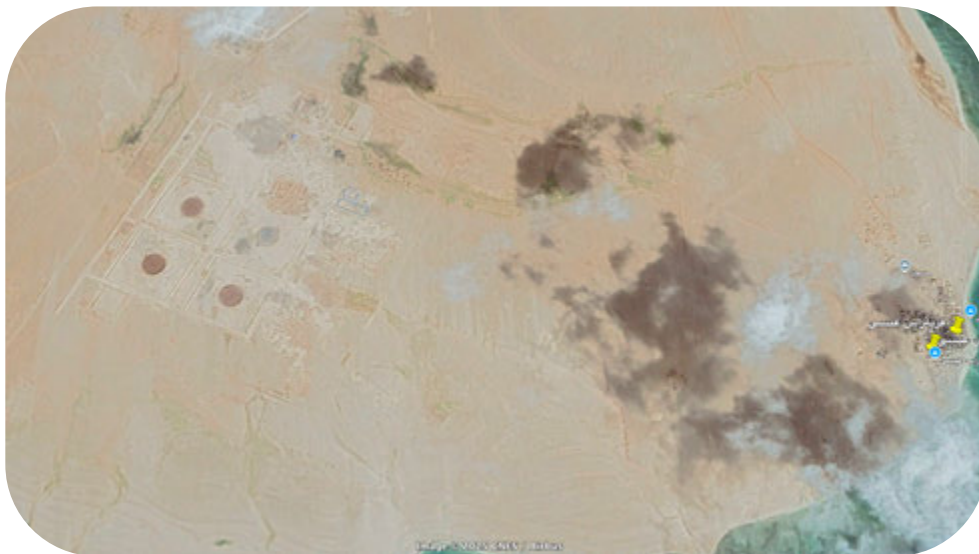


Satellite image showing the locations of the airstrikes that targeted Ras Issa

The State of Ras Isa Port

In January 2016, Ras Isa Port was [targeted](#) by airstrikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition supporting Yemen's internationally recognized government. The strikes targeted an incomplete oil facility located north of Ras Isa, which had originally belonged to Ahmed Saleh Al-Essi but had since been seized by the Houthis. The attack resulted in partial [destruction](#) of the facility, caused deaths and injuries, and destroyed several storage tanks and loading units for fuel trailers. Only three tanks remained operational—these were the same tanks targeted by the U.S. airstrike on the evening of April 17, 2025.

The state-owned company Safer had previously initiated the construction of crude oil tanks in the southwestern area of Ras Isa, specifically more than two kilometers west of Ras Isa village. However, the project was never completed, as shown in satellite imagery, because it was halted by the Houthis after they took control of Safer and other government institutions.



The projected site of Safer's oil tanks in Ras Isa
(suspended project)

The Houthis continued to use the fuel tanks originally owned by Al-Essi. After oil and gas tankers were redirected to Ras Isa, the port became severely congested, with ships waiting for several weeks to unload their cargo of petroleum products or domestic gas due to a lack of sufficient storage capacity. Fuel was offloaded directly from the ships onto trailers. From time to time, the Houthis would construct new jetties to accommodate the traffic—eventually building six jetties and a floating dock. The Houthis did not stop there. They went on to add new tanks as part of private investment ventures.



The newly constructed jetties and floating dock established by the Houthis

Repeated Targeting

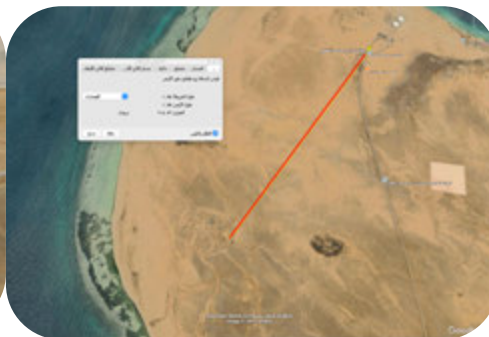
Between 2023 and 2025, the Ras Isa area was repeatedly targeted by Israeli and American airstrikes. Although the port's primary function was as an entry point for fuel supplies into Houthi-controlled territories, previous strikes had not directly or conclusively targeted the port itself—unlike the most recent attack on April 17, 2025. Throughout that period, the port was widely regarded by Yemenis and others as a civilian facility. However, satellite images reveal that the Houthi group had made considerable efforts to expose the port to military targeting. Over the past two years, they constructed an extensive network of military trenches and fortifications across large swaths of the western area—land that, prior to 2010, had been part of coastal defense zones, with no oil port or commercial operations present. This network begins approximately one kilometer south of the sugar refinery and extends westward toward the port in a branching pattern, reaching a fully developed military site located about one kilometer from the outer gate of the port, surrounded by earthen berms approximately three meters high.

The presence of such camps and fortifications in a civilian area inhabited by thousands of people—including workers transporting fuel, employees at the sugar refinery, and local residents—puts civilian lives at direct risk, particularly given the group's state of active warfare. Moreover, the area had already been subject to Israeli and American airstrikes, making such an attack foreseeable amid escalating hostilities.

Preventive measures should have been taken to minimize or avoid civilian casualties. Additionally, if U.S. forces truly aimed to strike a facility supplying fuel to the Houthis, they could have issued warnings and demanded the evacuation of the site, especially since their statements indicated the strike was not intended to cause loss of life.



The trenches begin at a width of 7 meters

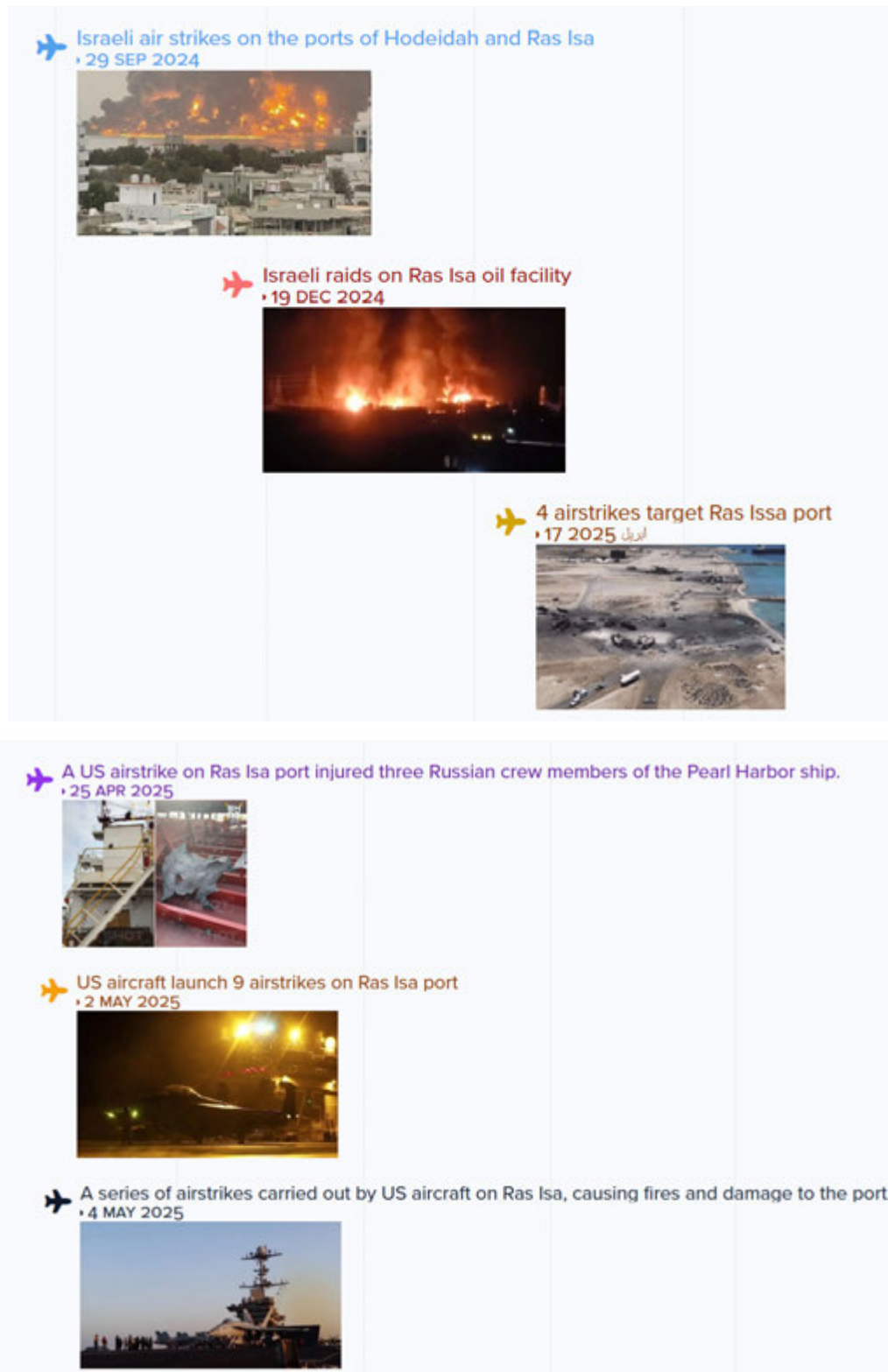


The trenches extend to an integrated military site approximately 1 kilometer from the external port gate



A photo showing a military site surrounded by earthen berms approximately 3 meters high

The most prominent incidents targeting Ras Isa Port (timeline)



Timeline of attacks on Ras Isa Port from September 2024 to May 2025

<https://www.preceden.com/timelines/1274553/embed/becd0dbaffd38ce3898947ce77152d69>

S	Date	Incident	Responsible Party	Material Losses	Human Losses		Sources
					Dead	Wounded	
1	May 4, 2025 US	A series of airstrikes on Ras Isa Port	aircraft	The raids caused fires and damage to the port	-	-	Anadolu Agency
2	May 2, 2025	9 airstrikes on Ras Isa port	US aircraft	Houthi media did not provide any details about the airstrikes or whether they resulted in human or material losses	-	-	Anadolu Agency
3	April 25, 2025	Airstrike on Ras Isa Port	US Air Force	Damage to Key Port Infrastructure	Three Russian crew members of the Seven Pearls ship were injured	-	Safety4sea Tass
4	April 17, 2025	4 airstrikes targeting Ras Isa port	US aircraft	Extensive destruction of vital facility infrastructure, including the destruction of a fuel platform and oil tankers	74	171	Al Jazeera CNN Arabic Al Jazeera Net US Central Command SAM Organization DW
5	December 19, 2024	Airstrikes on Ras Isa Oil Facility	Israeli Air Force	The raids caused damage to port infrastructure	9	3	Al Jazeera Anadolu
6	September 29, 2024	Israeli airstrikes on the ports of Hodeidah and Ras Isa	Israeli aircraft	More than 10 airstrikes targeted the ports of Hodeidah and Ras Isa, and the Al-Hali and Ras Katheeb power stations.	4	29	CNN Al Jazeera SAM Organization RT Al-Quds Al-Arabi

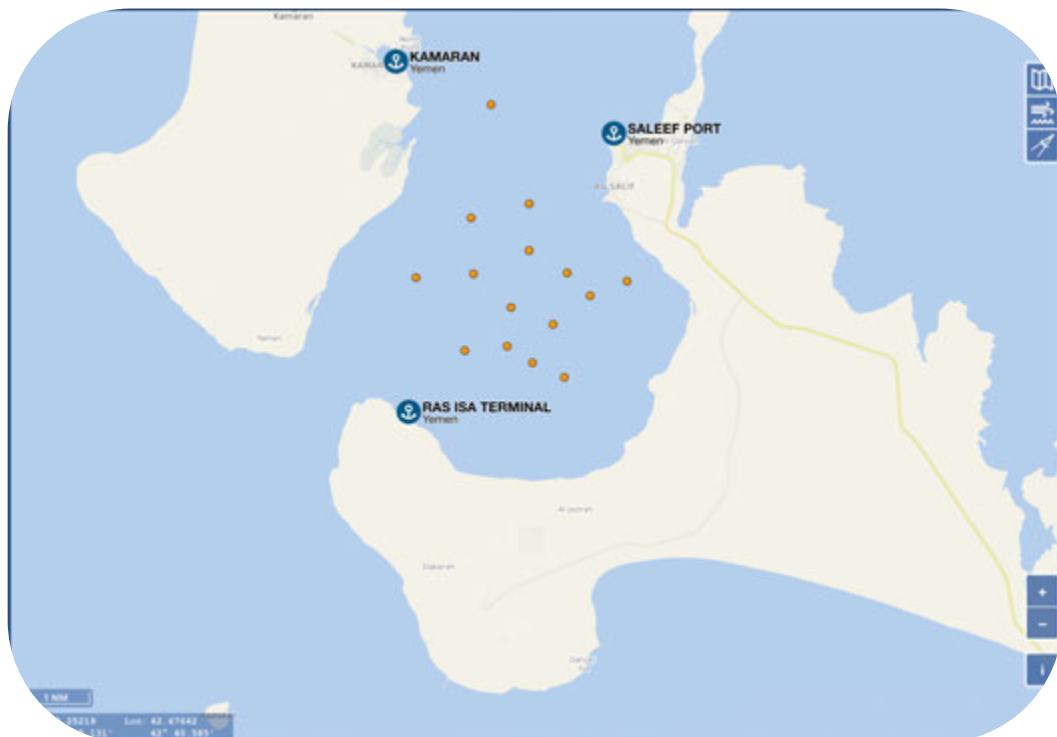
The missing image

The Houthis tightly control the flow of images, videos, and information from the areas under their control. They release only the narrative they choose and publish the images they want to be seen. As a result, all visual materials coming from Ras Issa are carefully curated, presenting a one-sided perspective that omits other angles which might reveal a fuller picture of the reality on the ground.

Ships at Ras Issa

According to ship-tracking tools and satellite maps, there are currently 16 oil tankers docked at Ras Issa. Port activity trackers indicate that no new vessel has been expected to arrive at the port since April 8, following the arrival of the last tanker from Djibouti Port (the JAG tanker).

Reliable sources report that the Houthi group threatened to target a vessel attempting to depart and also threatened to detain sailors who had captured video footage from their ships during the airstrikes. The group may have already detained some of them. However, the sailors managed to post disappearing stories online during the strike, which the Houthis failed to notice in time.



Oil tankers at Ras Isa port, April 8, 2025

Economic Damage

There are growing fears in Yemen over severe economic consequences from the recent U.S. airstrikes targeting the strategic Ras Issa oil terminal in Hudaydah Governorate, on the Red Sea coast in western Yemen. Experts warn that the destruction of the port will have immediate economic repercussions—not only for the Houthi group but also for the civilians in areas under their control. Ras Issa is considered one of the most vital maritime entry points still under Houthi control. Its destruction marks a dangerous escalation with significant impacts on both the group and the local population¹.

Experts explain that the port's shutdown will trigger an acute fuel supply crisis and a spike in domestic fuel prices. This supply gap will raise the cost of goods and services, directly affecting transportation and production expenses.

Initial estimates suggest that the airstrikes destroyed at least 70% of the port's storage capacity, threatening a diesel shortage within days—especially in Houthi-controlled areas that rely heavily on Ras Issa for fuel. Eyewitnesses report that fuel lines have already started to form in Hudaydah, Raymah, and Hajjah, accompanied by soaring prices on the black market².

Several key sectors are expected to be directly affected by the U.S. strike.

Electricity supply to homes and industries will be severely impacted. Agriculture, which depends heavily on fuel for water pumps, will be among the hardest-hit sectors. Hospitals and healthcare facilities are also expected to face major challenges due to power shortages, increasing the cost of medical services and possibly bringing them to a halt.

From a purely economic standpoint, the bombing of Ras Issa port constitutes a direct blow to Yemen's transportation and supply chain network—particularly given its role as a key gateway for energy and goods into local markets, especially in the northern regions³.

¹ Al Jazeera Net, <https://aja.ws/pzh3g2>

² Belqis Net, <https://belqe.es/a27bab>

³ Al Jazeera Net, <https://aja.ws/pzh3g2>

The destruction of the port's infrastructure has paralyzed distribution networks and disrupted supply chains, resulting in an almost immediate rise in operational and transport costs and a spike in retail prices. The interruption of supply activities has forced many fuel-dependent service and production facilities to temporarily shut down, reducing productivity and increasing informal unemployment rates.

This situation places additional pressure on already limited cash reserves in the market and fuels the expansion of the black market, where central control is absent and speculative trading prevails. Such targeting causes a dual shock: direct destruction and indirect damage by undermining the state's ability to manage economic activity in its most vulnerable regions. It also deepens the divide between political factions, as vital ports and economic infrastructure are weaponized in the conflict instead of serving as national assets.

Humanitarian Impact

Experts have warned of grave humanitarian and social repercussions. Restricting the flow of goods into Houthi-controlled territories will make it significantly harder to deliver humanitarian aid, particularly to remote areas—worsening Yemen's already dire food insecurity crisis.

An economic journalist confirmed that obstructing the flow of food supplies will further complicate Yemen's deteriorating humanitarian situation. The port's shutdown will create serious disruptions in supply chains and prevent the arrival of essential goods and food to local markets. A Houthi-affiliated institution stated that the disruption will increase the suffering of the Yemeni people, which has already worsened due to a blockade that has lasted more than ten years⁴.

The widespread destruction has also left hundreds of workers unemployed, many of whom support large families. This has added a new layer of economic hardship, and in the absence of rapid alternatives or adequate humanitarian support, these individuals now face an uncertain future.

Economic researcher Issam Muqbil emphasized that targeting a civilian economic facility like Ras Issa Port, under Yemen's current conditions, amounts to a war crime. Its consequences will significantly exacerbate Yemen's humanitarian and livelihood crisis⁵.

Testimonies of Survivors

SAM obtained testimonies from survivors who spoke to Alaraby TV. One of them said:

"I was there. We saw the blaze of the rockets—it shook [our hearts] and terrified the employees and workers."

Another added: "They burned the employees, the drivers—everything. Their rockets destroyed our gate. They hit the gates before we could escape. Whether you were a driver, an employee, or anyone—there was no way out through the gate. They destroyed them all. After burning us in the oil facility, they hit the gas company, struck the gas cylinders. The rockets exploded over us—over our colleagues. They burned them alive and killed them completely".

Another survivor said: "Some of them died right in front of me. Friends died beside me. Some had their legs blown off by shrapnel during the strikes."⁶

⁴ Al Jazeera Net, <https://aja.ws/pzh3g2>

⁵ Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, <https://edgs.co/xafoq>

⁶ Al Arabiya TV, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmY9NgDIRI4>

Legal Analysis

Under international humanitarian law, the bombing of Ras Issa Port constitutes a serious breach—particularly of Article 52 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which clearly protects civilian objects from attack unless they are used directly for military purposes.

In the absence of conclusive evidence that the port was being used for military objectives, the airstrike appears to violate the principles of distinction and proportionality. Furthermore, the United States' use of force within the territory of a UN member state, without Security Council authorization or formal consent from Yemen's legitimate government, breaches Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of any state.

According to these legal standards, this situation involves overlapping levels of legal responsibility requiring thorough analysis:

First, the Houthi group—an insurgent entity lacking constitutional or international legitimacy—bears responsibility for provoking foreign attacks through unlawful hostilities that exceed its authority and violate Yemen's sovereignty, including unauthorized cross-border assaults.

Second, the United States bears responsibility for violating international law and humanitarian law by using military force in a UN member state's territory without a Security Council mandate or consent from Yemen's recognized government. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits such actions, except in cases of self-defense or UN authorization. Additionally, attacking a civilian facility like Ras Issa Port without providing credible evidence of military use breaches Article 52 of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, which mandates clear criteria for distinction, necessity, and proportionality. Failure to meet these criteria renders the strike unlawful and opens the door to international accountability—including potential criminal liability before the International Criminal Court if the necessary elements of intent and consequence are established.

Third, the silence of Yemen's internationally recognized government raises both political and legal concerns. As the legitimate authority, it is expected to reject unauthorized attacks on its territory, to activate legal and diplomatic mechanisms in protest, and to defend its sovereignty. The absence of a clear response or effective international engagement weakens the government's negotiating position and sovereignty, reinforcing the global perception that Yemen is an ungoverned battleground for foreign military decisions.

In summary, responsibility intersects across three dimensions: a rebel group acting unlawfully, a foreign state violating sovereignty, and a legitimate government failing to safeguard its own sovereign authority.

Legal Recommendations

Based on the rules of international humanitarian law and the principles of the United Nations Charter, and taking into account the legal obligations to protect civilians and respect national sovereignty, the following recommendations are made:

First: The internationally recognized Yemeni government

- Pursue diplomatic and legal avenues to denounce any military intervention carried out without formal coordination with the government.
- Activate national and international mechanisms to investigate and document violations, thereby reinforcing Yemeni sovereignty.
- Reaffirm its exclusive right to manage sovereign affairs, and call on all external parties to respect this right.

Second: Ansar Allah (the Houthis)

- Strictly adhere to the rules of international humanitarian law and refrain from using civilian facilities for military purposes.
- Cooperate with neutral international bodies to assess the situation and verify the extent of the damage.
- Ensure the protection of civilians and avoid exposing them to risks resulting from military actions.

Third: The United States of America

- Refrain from using force on the territory of a sovereign state without a clear legal mandate or official consent from the recognized government.
- Comply with the principles of distinction and proportionality in any military operations carried out.
- Conduct a transparent investigation into the incident and consider providing compensation to those affected, should violations be confirmed.

Fourth: The United Nations and the Security Council

- Dispatch an independent and neutral fact-finding mission to investigate the targeting of the Ras Isa port.
- Review the legal frameworks governing the targeting of civilian infrastructure in complex armed conflicts.
- Support international accountability mechanisms and ensure that any party found to have violated international law is held responsible.

Fifth: The Israeli Entity

- Fully respect the sovereignty of the Republic of Yemen and refrain from any military actions outside the bounds of international law.
- Immediately cease any practices that violate Yemeni sovereignty and guarantee that civilian infrastructure will not be targeted under any circumstances.



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