

DEFENSE & SECURITY

Strategic Tensions in the Red Sea: Navigating the Complex Dynamics of the Middle East Conflict

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On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched “Al-Aqsa Flood,” an operation within Israeli territory. Subsequent developments heightened the risk of escalating the military conflict between Israel and Hamas into a regional conflict that could engulf the entire Middle East. Thereupon, the United States as a global power dispatched two aircraft carrier task groups and an amphibious readiness group to the region. This deployment aimed to deter Iran and its proxies from widening the conflict between Hamas and Israel by launching potential attacks on Israel. Although Hezbollah’s support for Hamas was less pronounced than expected, the Houthis—also known as Ansar Allah, an Iran-backed Shia Islamist political and armed movement originating from Yemen in the 1990s—provided significant [backing to Hamas](#).

On November 14, the leader of Yemen’s Houthis pledged in a televised address to target Israeli vessels navigating the Red Sea. This threat materialized in a series of naval assaults by the Iran-supported group. The most notable incident occurred on November 20, when the *Galaxy Leader*, a merchant vessel en route to India and allegedly owned by an Israeli firm, was hijacked. Its crew was captured and taken to Houthi-controlled Yemeni territorial waters. Moreover, in retaliation for Israeli actions in Gaza, the Houthis have announced their intent to strike merchant ships transiting the [Bab Al Mandeb Strait](#) if they are either bound for Israeli ports or linked to Israel. While their threats specify Israeli-affiliated vessels as targets, there remains an inherent risk to neutral ships due to the complexities of [maritime operations and ship ownership](#).

In response, U.S. destroyers equipped with Aegis air defense systems have been patrolling the Red Sea and have intercepted anti-ship missiles and drones with SM-2 guided missiles launched by the Houthis. According to the Pentagon and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), even though U.S. warships were not directly targeted, these actions were undertaken as measures under the right to self-defense but were not direct retaliations against the Houthis.

These developments indicate that the US, by not engaging directly with the Houthis, is keen to prevent further escalation in the Middle East. After the group captured Sana'a in 2014, overthrowing the legitimate Yemeni government, an Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened in 2015. This led, however, to a proxy battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which was supporting the Houthis. Using ballistic missiles and drones, the Houthis launched attacks on Saudi and UAE oil facilities until a UN-mediated ceasefire was established in Yemen in April 2022. Even though this ceasefire expired in October of the same year, major hostilities have largely ceased.

Upon assuming the presidency on January 4, 2021, President Biden identified the resolution of the Yemeni civil war as one of the administration's critical objectives. In February 2021, he took a significant step in an executive order revoking the designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization. Concurrently, the U.S. withdrew support from the Saudi-led military coalition against the Houthis. This pivot prompted Saudi Arabia and the UAE to reassess their security dependencies, leading to a broader realignment. With China's mediation, Iran and Saudi Arabia restored diplomatic ties in March 2023, signaling a potential shift in Middle Eastern geopolitics. Presently, Saudi Arabia is actively seeking a sustainable resolution with the Houthis. In this delicate context, unilateral U.S. military action targeting the Houthis could ignite regional tensions and further strain Saudi-U.S. relations. China is poised to capitalize on these developments by potentially expanding its political and diplomatic clout in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, Houthi attacks on merchant ships threaten the safety of navigation in the Bab Al Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea, undermining the principle of free use of the seas, a fundamental tenet of international law. Given the strategic importance of these waters, it is incumbent upon the US, as a global maritime power, to address this challenge. In response,

the U.S. has spearheaded a multinational military coalition. On December 18, 2023, Operation Prosperity Guardian was launched with the participation of the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, and Spain. As the U.S. Department of Defense stated, Operation Prosperity Guardian is a significant new security initiative under the Combined Maritime Forces. Led by Red Sea Security Task Force 153 (also known as Combined Task Force 153 or CTF 153), it aims to collaboratively tackle security challenges in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. As a primary objective, the initiative aims to ensure freedom of navigation for all nations and bolster regional security and prosperity.

The Prosperity Guardian initiative has garnered commitments from nineteen nations, including naval contributions from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and Italy. Additional support comes from Bahrain, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, and the Seychelles. Nine other participants have for now chosen to remain unnamed, a reflection of the delicate political landscape in the region. There are some conspicuous non-participants thus far, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and India, which are nevertheless considering ship deployment. Spain, France, and Italy have refused to give CTF 153 operational control of their warships participating in the operation, casting a shadow over the effectiveness and deterrence potential of the operation.

Operation Prosperity Guardian is fundamentally a defensive mission focused on neutralizing ballistic missiles and UAVs launched from the coast, thereby, safeguarding the freedom of navigation. Its mandate explicitly excludes offensive air or naval strikes against Houthi assets such as weapons depots, coastal radars, operational centers, or port facilities along the coast. Given its defensive nature, the operation has not effectively deterred the Houthis, who persist in their maritime assaults. Nevertheless, the US is reluctant to initiate a direct military confrontation with the Houthis independently.

The disruption of maritime commerce through the Bab Al Mandeb Strait holds significant economic implications for European Union countries. This disturbance in maritime traffic has compelled major international firms to pivot to the Chinese European Railway for their raw material transportation needs, inadvertently boosting the profile of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to elevate China's status as a global power since its inception in 2013.

Russian and Chinese vessels, however, currently transit the Bab Al Mandeb Strait unchallenged.

The inability of the rules-based international order to address these challenges emboldens authoritarian regimes. To counteract this, a concerted effort by the EU and NATO is crucial to secure maritime routes in the Bab al Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea, to deter Houthi aggression effectively, and to neutralize threats through targeted sea and air strikes when necessary. It is proposed that Operation Prosperity Guardian be escalated to a NATO-led operation to achieve its full potential. With this shift, the operation may succeed in guaranteeing unfettered navigation and deterring Houthi activities in these strategic waterways.

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