

DEFENSE & SECURITY

The Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea and New Dilemmas for the United States

JANUARY 14, 2024

Since the start of the Hamas-Israeli war last October, the Houthis – the Zaydi Shia armed group belonging that controls northern Yemen – has emerged as a crucial and threatening regional actor. Ironically, this has happened three years after their [removal from the US list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations](#).

First, the Houthis launched a series of [missile and drone attacks against Israel](#), targeting the Israeli Red Sea port city of Eilat and even [downing an American MQ-9 drone](#) in the Red Sea region. While the [ballistic missiles were promptly intercepted](#), they sent a clear message on the Houthis' stance, not only with respect to the Hamas-Israeli war, but also the wider regional constellation of state and non-state armed groups.

However, the Houthis' response to the confrontation between Hamas and Israel did not stop at drone and missile attacks. Rather, over the past few weeks, the Houthis have taken advantage of their strategic position on the Red Sea, where they control the port of Hodeida and the islands of Kamaran, Ras Douglas, and Taqfash, to threaten maritime traffic in those waters.

As the Houthis engage in these attacks from their privileged geographic position, it could not be more evident [how miscalculated](#) the decision taken by the international community in 2018 to impose the [Stockholm Agreement proved to be](#). This agreement, led by the UK Mission and endorsed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) under [Resolution 2541\(2018\)](#), included provisions on the then ongoing battle for Hodeida, imposing a cease-fire that ultimately allowed the Houthis to retain control over parts of the Southern Red Sea.

The first Houthi maritime attacks took place on November 19 with the [hijacking of the vessel *Galaxy Leader*](#). Since then, the group has unsuccessfully launched [26 other attacks](#) on vessels

transiting the Red Sea. While initially the attacks seemed to be directed towards vessels associated (no matter how loosely) with Israel, in more recent weeks, the Houthis have targeted [ships passing through the Red Sea that have no links to Israel](#).

Claiming that these attacks are a manifestation of solidarity with Gaza, the Houthis have been presenting themselves as staunch defenders of the Palestinian people. This has allowed them to obtain some support among the Yemeni people, thereby diverting attention from the [disastrous situation](#) across Houthi-controlled northern Yemen, characterized by rising food and fuel prices, unpaid public salaries, widespread unemployment, lack of economic opportunities, and brutal suppression of dissent.

The cost of the Houthis' maritime attacks

Far from being a localized regional matter, maritime security in the Red Sea is an issue of global concern. Western, Arab, and Asian countries depend on the Red Sea, which connects the Indian Ocean with the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean for trade. [Millions of tons of agricultural products](#) and other goods pass through the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait every year, alongside [8.8 million barrels of oil](#) daily.

In the wake of the Houthis' repeated attacks on commercial vessels, many major shipping companies have seen themselves forced to [reroute their ships](#) from the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal towards Africa and the Cape of Good Hope – a route that is much longer and therefore much more expensive. As of early January 2024, [half of the container ship traffic](#) that regularly transits the Red Sea and the Suez Canal is reported to be avoiding the route, a change that disrupts supply chains and raises the prospect of inflationary effects around the world.

Thus, while the Yemeni conflict since 2014 failed to capture the world's undivided attention, the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have ultimately put Yemen in the international spotlight.

Attempts at securing the Red Sea

In response to the security threat posed by the Houthis, the US sent additional warships to the region and [sought to expand Combined Task Force \(CTF\) 153](#). The CTF 135 is part of the [Combined Maritime Forces \(CMF\)](#), a 39-nation-strong maritime partnership headquartered in

Bahrain that comprises five CTFs focused on maritime security, piracy, and training.

The new effort to implement maritime security was launched on December 19 under the name [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#). However, shortly after its launch, it became clear that the naval task force would be mainly a US effort, with participation limited to some Western allies, the Seychelles, and Bahrain (home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet). Britain, for instance, said that it [would contribute HMS *Diamond*](#), a destroyer, to Operation Prosperity Guardian, while [Greece](#) and [Denmark](#) also committed a frigate, and the [Netherlands](#) and [Norway](#) promised to send staff officers. Conversely, [Spain said that](#) it “[would] not participate unilaterally in the Red Sea operation,” and [Italy sent a naval frigate](#) “to protect its national interests,” independent of the Operation.

Notable absentees from the US-led operation are Egypt and the internationally recognized government of Yemen, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). This demonstrates the popularity of the Houthi attitude and actions among the wider Arab public and the hesitance of regional countries to be seen taking the US-Israeli side. No matter how economically harmful the Houthis' attacks may be, without a ceasefire in Gaza, regional Arab countries are reluctant to position themselves against the Houthis, who support the Palestinians, and stand alongside the US, which backs Israel,.

Saudi Arabia has also refused to join the US-led operation, even though for more complex reasons than a simple desire to appease its Arab counterparts. The Saudis, in fact, have been [engaged in negotiations with the Houthis](#) for over a year, desperate to put an end to their disastrous adventure in Yemen and anxious to secure their southern border and the Red Sea waters, a necessary condition for the success of their [mega-projects](#) planned on the Saudi western shore. [Riyadh has been urging](#) the US to show restraint, concerned that a US military response would inevitably compromise the Saudi capacity to reach a deal with the Houthis and ultimately threaten Saudi targets.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia is reluctant to derail the [détente](#) that it reached with Iran in March 2023. Determined to avoid a renewal of tensions with Iran, the Saudis do not want to be seen taking the side of the United States and Israel, especially after Ali Shamkhani, a political adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader, [stated that](#) “any country joining the American

coalition [...] is a direct participant in the killing of children by the Zionist regime.”

For its part, the UAE seems comfortable with a more assertive line. Since the Emiratis support Yemeni armed factions based in the South, such as the [Giants Brigades](#) and the [Southern Transitional Council](#) (STC), they are interested in having the Houthis militarily weakened and sanctioned. Also, because the Emiratis did not participate in the Saudi-Houthi negotiations, they seem unaffected by the prospect of a temporary or even permanent hiatus in the talks. However, in the eyes of their citizens and the Arab world at large, this is not enough to justify an active alignment with the US while the Hamas-Israeli war continues.

Nonetheless, although the UAE is not ready to openly take part in Operation Prosperity Guardian, it might be open to other approaches to deal with the Houthi threat. In this regard, the role of Socotra is of great relevance. In keeping with the UAE’s wider maritime strategy in the region, whereby Abu Dhabi has been establishing its presence in ports in Yemen, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somaliland, the archipelago, [strategically positioned](#) at the entrance of the Gulf of Aden, is under *de facto* Emirati control. Considering [past reports](#) alleging that Israelis and Emiratis were engaged in intelligence cooperation in Socotra, questions are surfacing whether the UAE might eventually allow Israel to deploy some of its naval forces on the islands.

In the meantime, [Iran’s Defence Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani made known](#) that the multinational task force to protect shipping in the Red Sea would face “extraordinary problems.” This statement goes a long way in explaining how over the past eight years Iran has been using its [material support](#) to the Houthis to expand its influence and project its power throughout the Red Sea, which Teheran sees as a crucial maritime route to smuggle weapons to its allies in **Iraq, Syria, Lebanon**, and Gaza. Clearly, the Islamic Republic is determined not to lose this important advantage in the Red Sea waters.

A dangerous escalation in the Red Sea waters

Two weeks after the launch of Operation Prosperity Guardian, helicopters from two US warships, the USS *Eisenhower* and USS *Gravelly*, [sank three boats and killed ten Houthi fighters](#) following distress calls issued by the container ship *Maersk Hangzhou*. The clash was the first major direct military engagement between US armed forces and Houthi fighters.

In a statement released after the incident, the Houthis [said that their boats](#) were performing tasks aimed at “establishing security and stability and protecting maritime navigation,” as well as “performing their humanitarian and moral duty... to prevent Israeli ships or those heading to the ports of occupied Palestine from passing through the Red Sea.” Adhering to its traditional bellicose rhetoric, the official Houthi news agency also [published an editorial](#) under the headline “America has opened the door to hell for itself,” vowing revenge.

This emboldened attitude was most evident on January 9, when the group [launched one-way attack UAVs \(OWA UAVs\)](#), anti-ship cruise missiles, and an anti-ship ballistic missile into the southern Red Sea, towards international shipping lanes where dozens of merchant vessels were transiting.

Responding to that attack, on January 12 the [United States and Britain launched military strikes](#). [The strikes hit](#) the al-Dailami air base north of Sana’a, the airport in Hodeidah, Kahlan base in Saada, the airport in Taiz, and military positions in Hajjah and Dhamar. On January 13, the US launched [a second round of strikes](#) against Houthis weapons depots, launch sites, air defence radars, command and control nodes, and production facilities.

Following the attacks, Abdulmalik al-Houthi, the group’s supreme leader, [warned in a televised speech](#) that any US attack would not go un-responded. The group “would confront any American aggression” and their position “stems from our faith. The Americans should know what that means.” The [Houthi spokesperson Yahya al-Saree also issued a warning](#) to Western powers. After saying that the US and UK carried out 73 strikes that killed 5 and wounded 6 others of their forces, he termed the strikes as an act of aggression against his people and vowed that such actions would not go unpunished.

Conclusion

Following the US-UK attack within Yemen, many questions are inevitably raised on what will happen next.

The uncomfortable truth is that the Houthis seem to be navigating the current situation with ease – and certainly with greater ease than the US and its allies. First, the Houthis see the military attack by the US and the UK as a golden opportunity to capitalize on the pro-

Palestinian attitudes and the anti-foreign intervention sentiments that prevail in Yemen and [recruit new sympathizers, supporters, and fighters](#). In other words, this new level of confrontation with the US will allow the Houthis to generate a rally-around-the-flag effect in Houthi-controlled northern Yemen capable of making people forget (at least temporarily) the Houthis' [mismanagement of politics and economics](#).

Besides, the latest Western attacks are seen by the Houthis as an opportunity to further consolidate their posture within the regional landscape and Iran's Axis of Resistance, obtain more material support from Iran and its proxies, and acquire increasing visibility on the international and regional stage at the expense of the Yemeni legitimate government in the south.

Finally, it is noticeable that the Houthis promises to be emboldened further by the US-UK strike against them. This is clear by looking at the group's own history. Since 2004, the Houthis have been engaged in [repeated confrontations](#) against the government and since 2015 they have survived (and thrived in) [bombing by the Saudis](#). This latest clash with the world's most powerful military is thus nothing but a reason for pride for the Houthis - and one that they will not be scared to respond to. This could be continued strikes against ships transiting in the Red Sea, but also complex military operations against other targets, including US military infrastructure in the Gulf.

In the present circumstances, few good options exist for dealing with the Houthis. The US will need to strike a delicate balance between countering the Houthi threats in the Red Sea and preventing a fully-fledged military confrontation. To do so, it might be more beneficial for the US to refrain from approaching the current Houthi threat to maritime security as an isolated phenomenon, but rather to contextualize it in the wider Yemeni conflict. Specifically, the US and its allies should rethink the peace roadmap that was under way before the latest events and enhance support for the Yemeni legitimate government, which is the only actor that domestically can offer an alternative to the Houthis.

Orion Policy Institute (OPI) is an independent, non-profit, tax-exempt think tank focusing on a broad range of issues at the local, national, and global levels. OPI does not take institutional

policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions represented herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of OPI.