

# Escalation in the Red Sea and its Implications for Peace in Yemen

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## Introduction

In November 2023, the Houthi group started to launch maritime military operations, targeting what it describes as "Israeli ships" and "ships linked with Israel" in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The international community considered these operations a threat to international navigation and a violation of international law that would not go unanswered. These developments come at a sensitive juncture of the Yemeni peace process, which recently witnessed a significant progress. The parties to the conflict are preparing to sign an agreement on a roadmap for peace that ends the war and paves the way for final negotiations on the future of the country. So, what are the chances of launching a military attack on the Houthis in response to their maritime attacks and their threat to navigation? To what extent and in what way can these attacks and the military action in response to them affect the peace process in Yemen?

## Chances of Military Action against the Houthis

Before discussing the chances of a military response to Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, it is important to point out that Houthi targeting of shipping may not have any significant impact on the peace process. This is likely to happen if these operations are stopped, which, in turn, can take place as a result of various reasons; namely, success of the pressures exerted by regional actors and the international community on the Houthis and Iran, reaching an agreement to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza without restrictions— which is the Houthi condition for stopping their operations, and reaching a permanent ceasefire in Gaza. Thus, success of political pressure or a change of the status quo is a precondition for this scenario to materialize.

In the context of the reactions of the international community to Houthi attacks, the United States announced, on December 19, the formation of a multinational maritime coalition, Operation Prosperity Guardian, to protect navigation lines in the south of the Red Sea. The announced list of countries participating in this coalition includes nine countries besides the United States and the number may double. According to American statements, this coalition operates under the umbrella of Combined Maritime Forces and the leadership of Combined Task Force CTF 153, which was formed in 2022 to protect navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The announcement of this coalition was followed by some practical moves that included deploying ships to the Red Sea by member countries, or deploying more of them, as Britain and the United States did. The Pentagon, for example, issued an order to send the nuclear USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group to the Red Sea.

However, despite the formation of this coalition and the threats made by its member countries to the Houthis, targeting the Houthis militarily does not seem to be a promising option or to have a good chance. On the contrary, resorting to force is still the last option of the international community due to several reasons. To begin with, the issue is beset by many considerations and caveats. There are also regional and international interests that will be affected by a military response to the Houthi attacks, so any offensive against the Houthis may cause matters to get out of control, increase tension in the region and may lead to expansion of the conflict to a regional war, an outcome that all parties have been keen to avoid and prevent. In addition, a military action can cause a setback of the peace process itself and may reverse the progress achieved so far in this direction, thus causing things to be back to square one. A threat like this is antithetical to the great importance attached to resolving the conflict and achieving peace and the progress that has been achieved towards this goal by key regional players, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as by the international community. [For these considerations](#), dealing with Houthi attacks is handled cautiously. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt have distanced themselves from Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea or at least ensured that they did not figure in the announced list of the countries participating in the coalition, despite the fact that they are concerned with navigation security and threats represented by Houthi attacks and that their interests are compatible with that maritime initiative. In sum, none of the concerned regional and international actors [wishes](#) to open a war front with the Houthis.

Besides, the availability of other soft options to regional and international communities in dealing with Houthi attacks is another factor that further weakens chances of direct military confrontation with the Houthis.

- Exerting soft pressure: in fact, there is a focus and perhaps a bet on this option up to the moment. This option includes diplomatic pressure, especially as contacts between the Houthis and regional and international actors have not been interrupted. It also includes exerting psychological pressure on the Houthis by warning and threatening them, whether by imposing various sanctions on the Houthi group or by launching military operations against it.

The group has received many [international warnings](#) that involve explicit or almost explicit threats and use a language like "attacks in the Red Sea cannot go unanswered" or "we are considering several options with our partners, including a defensive role to prevent the repetition of such attacks." Undoubtedly, the formation of the Prosperity Guardian maritime coalition seeks primarily to pressure the Houthis, at least as reflected in the language in which the announcement of the formation of the coalition was expressed. It was ensured to avoid mentioning the Houthis or threatening them explicitly.

- Another active option that has been used from the first moment is disrupting the efficiency of Houthi military operations by intercepting the missiles and drones launched by the Houthis (without indulging in direct clashes with the Houthis), and by weakening the accuracy of Houthi attacks by jamming Houthi radars and deceiving their guided missiles, as well as through intensive monitoring and jamming of Iranian vessels and maritime assets in the vicinity of Yemen to reduce the chances of providing the Houthis with assistance.
- Recoursing of Israeli ships, those linked with Israel or heading to Israeli ports to the Cape of Good Hope, even temporarily, is another option that is the least costly and the least risky of all available options. In addition to the fact that it saves the costs of confrontation and extensive marine patrols, recouring ships does not impose additional burdens on the Israeli economy, given that the difference in the cost of maritime transport is affordable, at any rate.

Although political pressures are still being exerted, it can be said that they have failed to achieve any significant success yet. This is shown by the [persistence](#) of Houthi operations, and the defiant Houthi position as expressed by the group leader in his speech on December 20; i.e., a day after the announcement of the maritime coalition. He confirmed that his group will continue to carry out such operations in support of the Palestinians in Gaza and will proceed in this course whatever the costs. However, despite the failure of diplomacy and political pressures, recouring ships from the Red Sea to the Cape of Good Hope was an effective remedy. As the maritime transport companies changed the course of their ships, Houthi statements of military operations in the Red Sea came to an end. It seemed that the Houthis did not find any more ships to target, despite their rhetorical escalation and confirmation of continued operations.

Nevertheless, there is no sufficient ground to completely rule out [military action against the Houthis](#), who have proven to be a threat to the safety of shipping, regardless of their current targeting of Israeli shipping or of their actual motives. On the other hand, full reliance on soft approaches and alternatives, submission of vessels and recouring transit due to Houthi threats makes the regional and international position vulnerable as it appears to be lenient with the Houthis, emboldens them and makes them feel strong and victorious. This may embolden the Houthis to recklessly search for roles and victories. Other than that, opting for military action may be the result of accidental incidents or unintended developments.

In such a scenario, the maritime coalition will prefer to carry out limited military operations to warn the Houthi group and convey to it the message that its actions will not be tolerated in the hope that such restricted moves will be sufficient to deter it. These operations may include, for example, targeting Houthi radar sites and missile and drone launch sites, as the United States did in October 2016. However, such operations are unlikely to be sufficient to force the Houthis to stop their attacks and threats or to ensure that they do not carry out retaliatory acts. In fact, it is quite excluded that they will not have a retaliatory reaction given their pride and feeling that they are strong. Besides, failing to respond to attacks will show them to be weak and defeated. Previously, they have explicitly threatened to [target](#) American and international interests, including warships and vessels owned by countries participating in Prosperity Guardian, targeting Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and oil facilities if they are attacked. In this case, the maritime coalition will have to respond with large-scale operations that aim to paralyze Houthi capabilities in a way that forces them to stop their attacks and prevents any threats to navigation in the future.

### Probable Impact on the Peace Process

In light of the foregoing, the impact of these developments on the peace process is contingent on the reactions of the international community and the nature and degree of those reactions. In other words, it depends on the will of international and regional actors, what they want and what you will do. It can be said that the most important repercussions, necessarily negative repercussions for that matter, will be specifically the outcome of the use of force by the international community to coerce the Houthis to stop their attacks. In sum, the Houthi attacks on shipping and the reactions to those attacks will have repercussions on the peace process in Yemen.

These repercussions may unfold gradually at different stages and in different degrees according to developments on the ground. The most important of those outcomes depend on some conditions:

1. The threat to undermine and curb the pace of progress of the peace process, as these attacks may lead to stopping negotiations and postponing the signing of the agreement between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, which is supposed to be signed before the end of 2023, according to some leaks. This will happen if the international community freezes peace efforts (stopping negotiations and postponing the signing of the agreement) in an effort of putting pressure on the Houthis to stop their maritime operations. It may also be the outcome of any military operation against the Houthi group, which is not expected to continue to interact positively with peace efforts or to maintain its current position and obligations in the peace process, especially as it accuses the coalition countries in advance of conspiring with the Americans against it and threatening to target them if it is attacked.

2. In addition to the collapse of the fragile truce, things may get worse to the point of the collapse of the peace process itself. This will happen if the Houthis are targeted in large-scale attacks. Such attacks portend a return to war in Yemen. In fact, statements by the group leader himself go beyond that to expressly assert the group's intention to target all interests of the United States and its allies within reach, including oil facilities in the Gulf states. This is also confirmed by their defiant position that is reflected in their continued targeting of shipping despite pressures and military mobilization in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Houthi targeting of sensitive Saudi and Emirati interests will be a development that is unlikely to go unanswered either directly or indirectly through local proxies. A return to war in Yemen will undermine peace efforts completely, especially if it does not lead to any changes in the balance of power on the ground.

On the other hand, these attacks may have their negative or positive impact on the positions of the parties to the conflict and that may affect their position in any upcoming negotiations. This depends on the course of events and identity of those parties:

1. If Houthi attacks on shipping go unchallenged, the Houthis will be in a stronger political and negotiating position, and will enjoy popularity and political gains because of their entry into the war "in support of and in solidarity with Gaza," and their defiance of the international community, including the United States and Western powers.

Failure to target them will sound like a recognition of their power, at least from their own point of view on which they will build their political positions in any forthcoming peace negotiations. In other words, they will raise the ceiling of their demands and will be more intransigent in negotiations, thus adding new obstacles in the path of peace. This is also an expected outcome if they are targeted in an alarm operation which will not lead to weakening them or force them to stop their operations.

2. In the event of targeting the Houthis in a way that forces them to stop their attacks, and the operation weakens them militarily, things will change. They will suffer a political and military defeat that will weaken them politically and at the negotiating table even if they maintain popularity.

3. Generally, the Houthi attacks on shipping and their threat to international navigation have negative consequences for them. Their commitment to peace becomes questionable and confidence in them as a good partner for peace is shaken, especially as the attacks show them to be a radical entity that does not believe in coexistence and hence is a destabilizing factor in the region. All of this may give rise to a reconsideration of all positions towards them which might snowball into creating a stance of limiting their opportunities of playing an important or central role in the future of Yemen and to ensure that no negotiations or peace agreement should give them any significant gains or an opportunity to play such a role. Regional and external positions in general will be less lenient towards them.

4. Any losses suffered by the Houthis and any challenges posed by military action against them will be gains and opportunities for their opponents, whose position will generally improve and they will be in a relatively better position in any future negotiations. It is certain, for example, that regional actors and the international community will be more sympathetic with the position of the Yemeni government and its allies.





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