

# Attacks on the Houthis by the US and UK Have Escalated the Situation in the Red Sea Shipping Lane. Interview with Suat Delgen

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*The Houthis in Yemen have been attacking ships in the Red Sea which are associated with Israel or the US in response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza being carried out by Israel, who is supported by the US with all weapons and funding. US **President Joe Biden** continues to refuse all international calls for a ceasefire in Gaza.*

Biden has formed a military coalition to attack Yemen, the poorest country on earth, with famine and disease rampant. In an effort to understand the situation, Steven Sahiounie of MidEastDiscourse interviewed Suat Delgen.

Suat Delgen, a Defense Industry and Foreign Policy analyst, served for 16 years in the Naval Forces as a Staff Officer, undertaking project officer duties in various NATO and National Headquarters, as well as serving as a principal warfare officer and commanding officer on fast attack craft.

**Steven Sahiounie (SS):** The Houthis say they will continue attacking Israeli-associated ships until there is a ceasefire declared in Gaza. Can the US-led coalition against the Houthis succeed in stopping the attacks?

**Suat Delgen (SD):** The United States, as a global maritime power, plays a crucial role in ensuring the security of global trade routes. In light of the Houthis' attacks on Israeli-flagged ships and ships bound for Israel in the Red Sea and the Bab Al Mandeb Strait, these actions pose a significant challenge not only to regional stability but also to international maritime security, which the U.S. is keen to uphold.

The initiation of the multinational Operation Prosperity Guardian on December 19, 2023, marks an important step in addressing this challenge. However, the operation's efficacy is constrained by its defensive nature and the limited rules of engagement, which do not extend to pre-emptive strikes against strategic Houthi targets. This limitation, in my opinion, contributed to the operation's inability to fully deter Houthi attacks.

The situation took a significant turn with the UN Security Council's adoption of Resolution 2722, which, while not authorizing direct military action against the Houthis, underscored the international community's demand for a cessation of Houthi aggressions. Nevertheless, the subsequent direct military responses by the US and UK, bypassing the resolution's framework, seem to have only escalated the situation. This response, in my analysis, has not only failed to deter the Houthis but also appeared to garner them increased public sympathy, as evident from the large-scale demonstrations in Sanaa.

From a military standpoint, the resource-intensive nature of countering Houthi attacks, particularly their use of cost-effective drones and missiles against expensive defense systems, presents a logistical and economic challenge. In my view, this imbalance could potentially lead to a strategic stalemate, where the reduction in the number of attacks might be achievable, but completely stopping them seems unlikely under the current strategy.

In conclusion, while the joint US-UK military operations might curtail the frequency of Houthi attacks to some extent, the prospect of completely halting these attacks appears slim. It is my belief that the resolution of this conflict will require not just military might but also diplomatic efforts that address the underlying political complexities. The US's stance, especially considering its previous decision to delist the Houthis as a terrorist organization, suggests a potential preference for a non-escalatory approach. However, as with any conflict of this nature, the situation remains fluid and the outcomes uncertain."

**SS:** Some experts fear the situation in the Red Sea might escalate into a large-scale conflict. In your opinion, do you think Iran might face off against USA?

**SD:** In my opinion, the likelihood of the situation in the Red Sea escalating into a major conflict directly involving Iran and the USA is low. The strategic interests of the US in the Middle East, particularly with regard to its alliances with Gulf countries, play a crucial role in its decision-making process. A direct conflict, especially one that could be perceived as initiated by the US, risks jeopardizing these relationships and the broader stability of the region.

Moreover, the US has significant investments in regional integration projects, such as the IMEC corridor, which aims to enhance trade and transport links between India, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. The success of such initiatives often hinges on regional stability and the support of key players like Saudi Arabia. As Saudi Arabia's participation in the Abraham Accords for normalization with Israel is a critical aspect of this regional integration, the US is likely to avoid actions that could hinder this process. Therefore, in my opinion, while the US is committed to countering Iran's influence in the region, it is more likely to pursue indirect measures rather than direct military confrontation. The aim would be to limit Iran's regional sway without triggering a large-scale conflict, aligning with the US's broader strategic objectives of maintaining stability and fostering diplomatic relations in the Middle East.

**SS:** Saudi Arabia declined the US invitation to join the coalition against the Houthis. The Chinese-brokered deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran seems to be a success. In your view, will this act protect the Saudi oil industry?

**SD:** The recent developments in Saudi-Iranian relations, particularly the normalization effort under Chinese mediation, represent a significant shift in the regional geopolitical landscape. In 2021, following the US decision to remove the Houthis from its terrorist list and to scale back support for the Saudi-led coalition, Saudi Arabia was compelled to explore alternative strategies to safeguard its national security and interests. This shift, in my opinion, has been instrumental in prompting Saudi Arabia to engage in normalization talks with Iran.

The cessation of Houthi attacks on Saudi oil facilities, a consequence of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, has evidently contributed to a more secure environment for the Saudi oil industry. This stability is crucial for uninterrupted oil production and exports, which are central to the Saudi economy. Additionally, the improved relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran potentially enhance the security of key maritime routes like the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, which are vital for the global oil supply, including Saudi oil shipments.

However, it is important to note that the situation remains fluid. The long-term success of this normalization and its impact on the security of the Saudi oil industry will depend on the sustained commitment of both parties to this détente and the influence of other regional and global actors. While the current scenario presents a positive outlook for the security of Saudi oil production, the dynamics of regional politics necessitate a cautious approach in predicting future outcomes.

**SS:** Reports say Israel's economy has been affected by the Houthi attack. In your opinion, how much does this damage the Israeli economy?

**SD:** The reported Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and their implications for container traffic in the Red Sea have undoubtedly affected Israel's economy, particularly the operations at the port of Eilat. As one of Israel's key ports, Eilat plays a vital role in trade, especially with the Far East, India, and Australia. The port's significance in exporting minerals and importing goods like cattle and automobiles underscores its economic importance.

The reported figures, such as a 40% reduction in container traffic in Bab el Mandeb and an 85% drop in revenues at Eilat, highlight a substantial impact. However, it's important to contextualize these numbers within the broader framework of Israel's maritime trade. The shift of container traffic to other major ports like Ashdod and Haifa may mitigate some of the immediate economic impacts. These ports' continued operation is critical in ensuring that Israel does not face significant supply problems.

Nonetheless, the situation at the port of Eilat represents a specific economic loss for Israel. The reduction in activity there, especially in automobile imports (EVC) and mineral exports, has immediate and tangible economic consequences. While the overall resilience of the Israeli economy may help in weathering these challenges, the situation underscores the broader economic vulnerabilities that arise from regional conflicts.

In conclusion, while the ports of Ashdod and Haifa continue to operate, mitigating some of the broader supply concerns, the impact on Eilat and the specific sectors it serves represents a notable economic setback for Israel. As in any conflict situation, the dynamics

are fluid, and the long-term economic implications will depend on the duration and intensity of these disruptions.

**SS:** The Houthis are threatening the UAE and other countries that had a role in the coalition attack on Yemen. In your opinion, will the situation in the Red Sea escalate?

**SD:** The adoption of UNSC Resolution 2722 has indeed heightened international pressure on the Houthis, which could influence their strategic calculations. Considering their ambition to consolidate power in Yemen and establish themselves as a regional actor, the Houthis might be cautious about escalating conflicts to a point where they confront the entire international community. However, their targeting of Israeli and US ships has been a tactic to increase their popularity and political support within Arab societies and Yemen. This aspect can't be overlooked, as it plays into their regional political strategy. In the near term, adhering to UNSC Resolution 2722, such as releasing the Galaxy Leader ship, could be a strategic move to reduce immediate international pressure while maintaining their stance. Despite these maneuvers, I believe it is unlikely that the current tensions will escalate into a broader regional conflict involving major players like Iran and the UAE. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have demonstrated a cautious approach towards the Houthis, likely aiming to avoid further destabilization of the region.

In conclusion, while the Houthis may continue to pose a threat through sporadic targeting of US and Israeli ships, the overall situation in the Red Sea is more likely to be characterized by a cautious balance rather than outright escalation. This balance is precarious, however, and the actions of the Houthis, as well as the responses of regional and international actors, will be crucial in determining the future dynamics in the region.

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