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## The war in Gaza and Operation Prosperity Guardian

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The Red Sea is one of the world's most important trade routes, with its southern tip in Bab al-Mandeb strait (between Yemen and Djibouti) and its northern edge in the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aqaba. The Bab al-Mandeb Strait is only 29 kilometers wide at its narrowest point. About 12 percent of global trade passes through the Red Sea, which connects to the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal, including 30 percent of container traffic.

The Iran-aligned Houthis have ramped up drone and missile attacks on vessels in key shipping lanes since the start of the war in Gaza, targeting ships alleged to have links to Israel or Israelis. Houthi attacks have effectively rerouted a significant portion of global trade by forcing freight companies to sail around Africa, imposing higher costs and delays for energy, food and consumer goods deliveries.

On December 19, 2023, the US announced the formation of the so-called "[Operation Prosperity Guardian](#)", described by US officials as a new coalition that seeks to counter the threat posed by Iran backed Houthi rebels in the Red Sea.<sup>1</sup>

The US has said that more than 20 nations are participating in the multinational new task force, but only the United States, the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, Greece, Spain and Denmark willing to publicly signal their

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involvement. The new task force is an expansion of an existing US-led task force, Combined Task Force 153, which currently has its base in Bahrain. CTF-153 currently has 39 member nations.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said that "Countries that seek to uphold the principle of freedom of navigation must come together to tackle the challenge posed the Iran backed Houthis."<sup>2</sup>

Vice Adm. Brad Cooper commander of US 5th Fleet in the Middle East said on December 31, 2023 that since "Operation Prosperity Guardian" was announced more than 1,200 merchant ships have traveled through the Red Sea region, and none has been hit by drone or missile strikes.<sup>3</sup>

Currently there are five warships from the United States, France, and the United Kingdom patrolling the waters of the southern Red Sea and the western Gulf of Aden. *Since the operation started, the ships have shot down a total of 17 drones and four anti-ship ballistic missiles*, he said.<sup>4</sup>

The US military said that the Houthis have conducted at least 24 attacks on merchant shipping in the Red Sea since November 19, 2023. The latest attack was on January 3, 2024, when the US military said Houthis fired two anti-ship missiles from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Houthi response to Operation Prosperity Guardian**

It should be noted that since the establishment in mid-December of the multi-national maritime force, led by the U.S., senior Houthi officials have often threatened the force and accused it of supporting Israeli "aggression" against the Gaza Strip and of endangering international marine traffic in the Red Sea.

Yemeni-Houthi leader Abdul-Malik Badreddine Al-Houthi responded to the American-led naval coalition in a December 20, 2023 statement on Al-Masirah TV (Houthis-Yemen).

He warned that if the U.S. attacks Yemen, the Houthis will target American ships, interests, and maritime traffic. Al-Houthi said that the thing that the Houthis "want most" is for the war with the U.S. and Israel to be a direct confrontation, and not with "American collaborators."

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He added that if the Americans send their soldiers to Yemen, they will face a lot worse than they did in Afghanistan or Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

Mohammed Ali Al-Houthi, a member of the Houthi Supreme Political Council warned on a December 21, 2023, show on Mayadeen TV (Lebanon) that the Houthis would attack American maritime vessels. He added that they will attack any vessel that "confronts the Yemeni people." Al-Houthi stated that this includes oil tankers en route to Europe, and he added that the Europeans should prepare for a "harsh winter." He continued to say that Saudi Arabia would "not be immune" to Houthi retaliation if attacks against Yemen are carried out from within its borders.<sup>7</sup>

On December 27, 2023, the heads of the Houthi Ansar Allah movement armed forces and security bodies convened what they called "an exceptional meeting". At the meeting, participants warned the U.S. and its allies against "the folly of militarizing the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden." Ansar Allah Defense Minister Major General Muhammad Al-'Atifi, who delivered a speech at the meeting, asserted that the armed forces of Yemen are ready "to teach the enemies the harshest and strongest blows." Another senior Houthi official posted a message on the X platform in which he referred to Operation Prosperity Guardian as "the Genocide Guardian Alliance" and claimed that its establishment by the U.S. "is a disgrace in the history of America." He also called on the American government to "dismantle the Zionist entity."<sup>8</sup>

### **The escalation - the attacks on the Maersk Hangzhou (December 30 - 31, 2023)**

The container vessel Maersk Hangzhou was struck by a missile on December 30, 2023, 55 nautical miles southwest of Hodeidah, Yemen. A US warship shot down another two anti-ship missiles fired from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen, according to the US Central Command (CENTCOM). The Singapore-flagged Maersk Hangzhou with capacity to carry 14,000 containers was en route from Singapore to Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

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On December 31, 2023, the same ship was attacked by Houthi militants in four small boats. Helicopters from the USS Eisenhower and USS Gravelly, responding to distress calls from the Maersk Hangzhou, returned fire on the Houthi boats in self-defense and sank three of four small boats used by Iranian-backed Houthi militants to attack the Maersk Hangzhou in the southern Red Sea. The fourth boat fled the area.

Danish shipping company Maersk confirmed that the crew was safe and there was no indication of fire onboard the vessel that was fully maneuverable and continued its journey north to Port Suez.<sup>10</sup> In response to the attacks Maersk said it would delay all transits through the area for 48 hours.<sup>11</sup>

In a statement on December 31, 2023, the Houthi group said the boats were performing tasks aimed at “establishing security and stability and protecting maritime navigation and the boats were 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”. The Houthis said they have lost at least 10 fighters after three of their boats were attacked by US forces in the Red Sea.<sup>12</sup>

The official Houthi news agency ran an editorial under the headline “America has opened the door to hell for itself” on January 1, 2024, vowing vengeance for US Navy attacks on their boats in the Red Sea, accusing the US of supporting Israel’s heavy bombardment of Gaza by preventing them from imposing their ban on Israel-linked ships sailing through the Red Sea. The news agency said that the US Navy performed “a foolish act by targeting three boats, as a result of which ten members of the Yemeni naval forces martyred, thus opening the door of hell upon itself, its ships, and its military bases in the region.”<sup>13</sup>

The Red Sea clash on December 31, 2023, was the first major direct military engagement between the US military and Houthi fighters. The U.S. on January 3, 2024, led a final call for the Iran backed Houthis to halt attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea, warning that there would be “consequences” if they persisted. “Let our message now be clear: we call for the immediate end of these illegal attacks and release of

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unlawfully detained vessels and crews,” read a joint statement signed by the US, Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, and UK.<sup>14</sup>

“The Houthis will bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and free flow of commerce in the region’s critical waterways,” the statement added.<sup>15</sup>

A senior Biden administration official declined to detail rules of possible engagement if the attacks continue, but underscored that the Iranian-backed Houthis should "not anticipate another warning" from the US and its allies.<sup>16</sup>

The former head of the US Central Command, retired Gen. Joseph Votel, said the naval task force was a way to try to mitigate the risk but added that “without direct action consequences, it will likely not curb the [Houthis’] actions in a more rapid fashion.” The former CENTCOM commander also pointed to other US adversaries watching how Washington responds. “I would say that Russia, China, North Korea, Iran and violent extremist organizations are paying attention to how we are responding to this situation and will attempt to draw conclusions of their own,” he said.<sup>17</sup>

### **The response of Iran**

Though the Islamic Republic has avoided any direct military involvement in the Israel-Hamas conflict, the regime has used its allies such as Houthis and militant groups in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq to attack Israel and American targets in the region. The Houthis have declared themselves part of the “axis of resistance” of Iran-affiliated groups.

Iran’s Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani warned that a proposed US-backed multinational task force allegedly “to protect shipping in the Red Sea” would face extraordinary problems, official Iranian media reported on December 14, 2023.<sup>18</sup> “If they make such an irrational move, they will be faced with extraordinary problems,” Ashtiani told the official Iranian Student News

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Agency (ISNA). “Nobody can make a move in a region where we have predominance,” he said, referring to the Red Sea.<sup>19</sup>

Iran’s Alborz warship has entered the Red Sea after passing through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, a state-affiliated news agency reported on January 1, 2024. In its report, Tasnim, which is said to be close to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), did not specify the details of the Alborz’s mission but it highlighted the implications of the Gaza war on the wider region. “Following rising tensions in the Gaza war, there has been an acceleration in developments in the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait,” it said.<sup>20</sup>

### Summary

Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, the Iranian regime and its Houthi affiliate force in Yemen have purportedly conducted over 34 incidents of maritime aggression involving firing over 100 missiles and drones at commercial vessels and illegally seizing them. This has prompted major shipping companies to take the longer and costlier route around Africa's Cape of Good Hope rather than through the Suez Canal.

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The United States launched *Operation Prosperity Guardian* on December 19, 2023, saying more than 20 countries had agreed to participate in the efforts to safeguard ships in Red Sea waters near Yemen.

Iran announced it was deploying the Alborz warship to the Red Sea after the US repelled an attack by the Iran-aligned Houthi militias in Yemen on a container vessel, sinking three boats and killing 10 militants.<sup>21</sup>

The United States has not deterred Iran or the Houthis from disrupting global shipping and the continuation of Iran-linked maritime aggression and the deployment of the Alborz indicate that the Houthis and their

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sponsors in Tehran seek to escalate their pressure not only against Israel but on the entire global economy.

Meanwhile, the New York Times reported that Pentagon officials have come up with plans to strike Houthi missile and drone basis in Yemen should the need arise. Writing in the Daily Telegraph newspaper, British Defense Secretary Grant Shapps said: "We are willing to take direct action, and we won't hesitate to take further action to deter threats to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea." "The Houthis should be under no misunderstanding: we are committed to holding malign actors accountable for unlawful seizures and attacks," he said.

*On January 3, 2024, the US and a group of 12 countries have warned Yemen's Houthi rebels of "consequences" unless they stop their attacks on Red Sea shipping vessels.*

The US must match the announcement of Operation Prosperity Guardian with substantive action. Deterring and degrading the ability of the Iranian regime and the Houthis to launch these attacks requires consistent and strong military strikes against the Houthi fighters in Yemen responsible for conducting them.<sup>22</sup>

The former head of the US Central Command, retired Gen. Joseph Votel, said that other US adversaries watching how Washington responds. "I would say that Russia, China, North Korea, Iran and violent extremist organizations are paying attention to how we are responding to this situation and will attempt to draw conclusions of their own."<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>5</sup> Washington, allies' issue final warning to Iran-backed Houthis over Red Sea attacks, Al Arabiya, January 4, 2024.

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<sup>6</sup> Yemeni-Houthi Leader Abdul-Malik Badreddine Al-Houthi Warns: We Want a Direct Confrontation with The U.S. And Israel; If America Strikes Us, We Will Target American Ships, Interests, Maritime Traffic, Source: Al-Masirah TV (Yemen), MEMRI, December 20, 2023.

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<sup>21</sup> Is a Western-Iranian Clash in Red Sea Imminent after US Strike against the Houthis? Asharq Al Awsat, January 2, 2024.  
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