

# HOUTHİ ATTACKS ON THE RED SEA: INDIA NEEDS TO TAKE A STAND

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

The airstrikes on Houthi rebel targets inside Yemen on January 11 by the US and the UK, with support from Australia, Canada, Bahrain and the Netherlands, was a significant event in the seemingly escalating Red Sea conundrum. About 72 targets were attacked using precision weapons. The Houthi targets comprised command and control nodes, ammunition depots, weapon launching systems, production facilities, and air defence radar systems. While British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak termed it an act of “self-defence,” the strikes drew condemnation from Russia, Iran, the Houthis, Hamas, Turkey, Hezbollah, and Oman. Egypt and Saudi Arabia were more nuanced, calling out their “concern” over the escalation. Expectedly, the Houthis have vowed to retaliate. The internationally recognised government of Yemen has blamed the Houthis for dragging Yemen into a quagmire.

The Houthi-Saudi animosity dates back three decades ago. The conflict can be traced to the increasing influence of the Saudi-propagated Salafi version of Islam that started taking strong roots in Yemen. This was perceived negatively by the Zaydi sect of Islam in Yemen. The first decade of this century witnessed the Houthis rebelling against the Yemeni government over allegations of corruption and misgovernance. The Arab Spring of 2011 led to widespread protests in Yemen, leading to the resignation of then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, backed by Saudi Arabia, replaced him as the leader. This led to a civil war that, to date, shows no signs of abating. The complicated geopolitics of the Arabian Peninsula ensured that Iran, which considered Saudi Arabia its geopolitical rival, supported the Houthis. Since then, the Iranian moral, material, financial and military support for the Houthis has only grown. Emboldened by the support and with the active connivance of Iran, the Houthis have been targeting ships of Saudi Arabia and UAE for a long time. However, Iran and the Houthis have opportunistically seized the Israeli reaction to the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas to escalate and widen the scope of attacks on maritime shipping in and around the Red Sea.

The escalatory attacks by Houthis have added to the global economic woes perpetuated by the Russian invasion of [Ukraine](#). Four out of five of the world’s largest container-shipping companies have suspended routing through the Red Sea. The alternate route via Cape of Good Hope adds about 14 days to a trip from West Asia to Europe, incurs additional costs, and implies higher greenhouse gas emissions. About \$1 trillion of world trade passes through the Red Sea every day. The Houthis’ actions have already raised oil and gas prices besides increasing shipping insurance premiums. Last month, the US launched Operation Prosperity Guardian, a multi-national security initiative to jointly address security challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to ensure freedom of navigation for all countries and bolster regional security and prosperity. As the increasing attacks by the Houthis show, this did not deter them, hence the need for the recent air strikes.

By the reactions so far, the million-dollar question is: Will the air strikes halt or at least slow the Houthis? First, the Houthis have never shown any inclination for a peaceful resolution. The Trump administration had designated Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO). In 2021, the Biden administration removed this to support peace efforts, enable humanitarian relief, and deliver aid to millions of suffering Yemeni citizens. Unfortunately, this emboldened the Houthis, and since the 2021 lifting of the FTO status, the number and intensity of attacks on merchant shipping have only increased.

Second, the strikes should be seen as a resolve to enforce international law in the commons. While they may not stop attacks by the Houthis, they at least partially signal deterrence and perhaps deplete the Houthis' ability to maintain the tempo of attacks. Inaction by the US would have signalled helplessness, further emboldening the Houthis.

Third is the Iran factor. Iran continues to punch above its weight despite a tottering economy, rising unemployment, and social unrest. Using a mix of religion, sectarianism and hybrid warfare through proxies such as the Houthis, Iran keeps the pot boiling. Until such time, the US and its allies can effectively target Iranian logistics and supply lines into Yemen, the Houthis will have the wherewithal to continue their aggressive and illegitimate actions.

It would be a fallacy to think that the Red Sea conundrum concerns only a few countries or is a sub-regional issue. The implications are global, both economically and geopolitically. Any unilateral concessions to the Houthis and their backers (read: Iran) means further diluting the already tenuous adherence to international norms, encouraging more such groups and countries that have no moral compulsions to resort to engaging in hybrid warfare and destabilisation. India, too, is not unaffected by the happenings in the Red Sea. Even as Indian Naval ships have increased their presence, it is in the diplomatic realm that India needs to display more initiative, drive and imagination. For starters, we must read the riot act to Iran quietly and "behind the scenes", if need be. Next, we ought to actively reach out to emerging economies, middle powers, and lesser developed countries to form a consensus to call out the Houthis. An India-sponsored resolution in the UN condemning the Houthis (and any country that backs it) is likely to find widespread support. The Russians may oppose it, and the Chinese may abstain. The Houthis may not stop their attacks. But by introducing and sponsoring such a resolution, India will be seen as a true champion of the Global South and a country that does not forever sit on the fringes. One expects nothing less from an emerging power.

***The writer served in the Indian Air Force. Views are personal***

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