



New Coalition to Protect the Shipping Route via the Red Sea

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On 19 December, the U.S. initiated an international coalition to protect the trade shipping route through the Red Sea. *Operation Prosperity Guardian* will protect commercial ships from attacks by the well-armed and increasingly aggressive pro-Iranian militants from Yemen. Attacks by this group since 7 October have disrupted safe maritime lines of communication and carry the risk of further regional escalation between Iran and the U.S.

How is Yemen connected to the Israel-Hamas war?

Attacks on shipping in the area of the Red Sea are being carried out by the Houthi movement, which controls a significant part of the territory and the capital of Yemen. It is formed by the Shia group Ansar Allah (Followers of Allah) and Yemenite Houthi clan, comprising a group sponsored, trained, and armed by Iran. The Shia authorities in Sanaa are the target of UN sanctions and have no international recognition (only an “embassy” of Iran operates there). The Yemeni militia is increasingly [resembling the Lebanese Hezbollah](#) in terms of military organisation and use of relatively advanced weapons. It belongs to the so-called “Axis of Resistance”, an alliance of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, radical Shias from Iraq, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas. In the previous decade, the Houthis were focused on Yemen’s civil war and [attacking Saudi Arabia](#), only occasionally threatening civilian vessels in the Red Sea. Despite their considerable distance from the Gaza Strip, [after 7 October](#), Yemeni militants declared solidarity with Hamas and carried out several unsuccessful missile strikes in the direction of Israel. Their strikes in Red Sea waters have been targeting merchant ships sailing in this area, and over two months, by 19 December, at least 10 ships have been struck and damaged.

What is the importance of the shipping route via the Red Sea and what is the threat?

Transit through the Red Sea—mainly ships transporting grains, crude oil, and liquefied natural gas—accounted for 10-15% of the world trade. The reservoir is of strategic importance for Asia and Europe and handles up to 40% of trade between them. The narrow Ban al-Mandab Strait remains a key water link between the Indian Ocean, the Suez Canal, and the Mediterranean Sea. The series of Houthi attacks blocked the Israeli port of Eilat, halted movement of BP oil tankers in the area, and led to increasing oil prices by 2.6%, while extending cruises from 25 to 43 days (via the alternative route around Africa) and raising transport costs and insurance rates. The Houthis have used various types of Iranian kamikaze drones and anti-ship missiles in their attacks, but they might also use equally dangerous sea mines and surface or sub-surface kamikaze drones. Following Iran’s Revolutionary Guard experience in the Persian Gulf, the Houthis can also harass selected civilian ships with swarms of armed and fast boats, as well as intercept military drones, helicopters, and airplanes at low altitudes. Moreover, the boarding and abduction of the crew of the ship *Galaxy Leader* (on 19 November) suggest the threat of similar actions to take hostages and negotiate with shipowners or the governments of their countries of origin.

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Who is active in the new international coalition?

The U.S. invited more than 40 countries to join the new “coalition of the willing”, and according to media, by late December 25 states supported it politically or militarily. This group is also backed by the EU and NATO, which may result in the greater involvement of European countries. So far, 10 states have been confirmed as military contributors, including Bahrain (the only Arab country), Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, Spain, UK and the U.S. Their naval forces might operate within enlarged framework of the existing Task Force-153, already present in the waters of Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden. This is one of five task forces operating since 2001 as a part of the 39-member state Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). It might be assumed that the new coalition will be expand forces and tasks beyond countering smuggling and pirates, now focusing on convoying ships and deterring further attacks from Yemen. Also noteworthy is the recent deployment of additional U.S. vessels to *Prosperity Guardian*, especially the aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower, amphibious assault ship USS Bataan, and four Burke-class guided missile destroyers. If necessary, the new coalition could be supported by the U.S. air assets and special operation forces from bases in the Persian Gulf.

Is there risk of further regional escalation?

The Houthi’s strikes on Israel and civilian ships demonstrate expansion of their strategic agenda beyond Yemen—at least for the duration of the war in Gaza—in concert or at the request of Iran. In the case of an attempt to completely block shipping in the Red Sea, the U.S. may quickly switch from escorting civilian vessels to direct operations against the Houthis. [The surge in American military capabilities in the region](#) allows the U.S. to launch missile and air strikes against targets in Yemen. However, this scenario would also increase the aggressiveness of pro-Iranian militias against small U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria—so far there have been 120 attacks, but fortunately without any Americans killed. Moreover, [Iran could also renew tensions in the Persian Gulf](#), but likely while avoiding the provocation of strong U.S. military response. Currently, there is a much lower risk in the context of Israel’s security, which with U.S. help is effectively intercepting all missiles from Yemen. Israeli operations against the Houthis would be more likely in the case of open war with Hezbollah. Then, Yemen could become one of several fronts in a regional war between the entire “Axis of Resistance” and Israel with U.S. All these potential belligerents seems to be not interested in uncontrolled military escalation in the region. Even in a non-worst case scenario, further developments in the Middle East may engage not only the U.S. and UK but also many EU countries ready to take greater responsibility for freedom and security of international shipping routes.