

## The strategic analysis for addressing Houthi attacks

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*The Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which started in November 2023 after being halted during negotiations and the hostage exchange between Israel and Hamas, were reignited as a direct response to escalating tensions. Due to their actions and ties to Iran, the U.S. responded with escalating military strikes, while the Houthis remain steadfast in their objectives despite international pressure.*

Despite the military and economic measures taken by the international coalition, the Houthis' resilience appears to remain unaffected. Their ability to maintain offensive operations and leverage the Gaza conflict to justify their actions suggests that current deterrence strategies have not been effective— not due to reduced capacity or lack of political will, but primarily due to an inability to persuade. As a result, a shift toward offensive operations targeting their capabilities was decided. This approach could be a sustainable strategy but comes with risks, particularly the escalation of tensions across the region.

### **Analysis**

A more aggressive military approach could degrade the operational capabilities of Houthis and potentially deter them from launching missile attacks. However, it also risks escalating tensions and possibly drawing Iran further into the conflict. The Houthis are not merely an isolated militant group; they serve as a strategic proxy for Iran, which provides them with weapons, intelligence, and political support. Any direct escalation against the Houthis could provoke a stronger Iranian response, either through increased support for them or by expanding the conflict to other regions such as Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon. Furthermore, previous attempts at sustained military campaigns in Yemen—such as those led by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition—

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did not neutralize the Houthis but instead solidified their strength and legitimacy as a resistance force. If the U.S. pursues a long-term campaign to overthrow the regime, it must consider the risk of a prolonged insurgency and potential regional backlash.

An effective strategy to address the Houthi conflict may require a balanced combination of precision military actions, economic sanctions, and diplomatic initiatives aimed at isolating the Houthis from their external allies. Regional actors, such as Oman, and diplomatic engagement with Iran could play pivotal roles in reducing tensions, despite inherent challenges. Oman, with its history of neutral mediation and strong relationships with both Iran and Western nations, offers a unique opportunity for fostering dialogue. By leveraging Oman's diplomatic influence, there is potential to create pathways for de-escalation, especially if the Houthis recognize the prospect of political or economic benefits through negotiation rather than prolonged military conflict.

Negotiations with Iran present a unique set of complexities. Tehran regards the Houthis as a critical element in its broader regional strategy and may hesitate to scale back its support without securing significant concessions, such as progress in nuclear negotiations or sanctions relief. Even if Iran were to reduce its material backing, the Houthis have developed robust domestic capabilities, including advanced drone and missile production, enabling them to sustain military operations independently.

While diplomacy remains essential, it must be complemented by robust deterrence measures. Precision military strikes targeting key Houthi assets—particularly their missile and drone capabilities—could curtail their operational effectiveness without necessitating a full-scale military intervention. Additionally, economic strategies, such as disrupting smuggling networks and imposing targeted sanctions on financial systems controlled by the Houthis, could further increase pressure and limit their operational reach.

### **Regional Dynamics: The Role of Yemen's Neighbors**

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) hold significant potential to take a more proactive stance in addressing the challenges posed by the Houthis. However, their current strategic imperatives suggest that direct military escalation remains unlikely unless their national security is directly threatened.

For Riyadh, years of costly involvement in Yemen have led to a strategic pivot—from direct military intervention to prioritizing diplomatic avenues. Saudi Arabia has engaged in backchannel negotiations, facilitated by Oman, aiming to secure a long-term ceasefire and a political resolution to reduce cross-border hostilities. While Houthi missile and drone strikes on Saudi territory remain a pressing concern, Riyadh's focus has shifted towards fostering regional stability and advancing

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economic reforms under the Vision 2030 framework. That said, a significant escalation in Houthi attacks—whether targeting Saudi territory or critical maritime corridors in the Red Sea—could alter Riyadh’s approach. In such a scenario, while a full-scale military campaign is unlikely, Saudi Arabia may intensify intelligence sharing, logistical backing, and precision airstrikes, potentially as part of a broader international coalition. The evolving dynamics in Yemen underscore the delicate balance between security imperatives and long-term strategic priorities for the region’s key players.

The UAE has taken a distinct approach in Yemen, concentrating on consolidating its influence in the southern regions by supporting the Southern Transitional Council (STC). While Abu Dhabi has significantly scaled back its direct military engagement, it continues to maintain a strategic presence through allied militias and naval operations. Should the Houthis persist in threatening critical maritime trade routes in the Red Sea, the UAE may adopt a more proactive role in naval security operations, potentially collaborating with the US and the ASPIDES initiative, which also includes Greece.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE appear inclined to sustain a lower-profile strategy, avoiding direct confrontation with the Houthis. Instead, they are relying on international forces—primarily the US and its allies—to manage the threat. Lessons from their past involvement in Yemen have underscored the high cost and limited effectiveness of direct military campaigns, making them cautious about engaging in another extended conflict. Their strategy leans toward supporting international coalition efforts and pursuing backchannel diplomacy with the Houthis. However, if Houthi aggression intensifies to the point of jeopardizing the Gulf’s security or economic stability, both nations could be compelled to respond with a more dynamic yet measured military approach.

### **Conclusions**

The prospect of an official regional military alliance involving Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the United States presents a potentially viable solution, but its success hinges on several critical factors. Geopolitical dynamics, strategic priorities, and the willingness of these nations to collaborate effectively will play pivotal roles.

While these countries share a common objective of addressing the Houthi threat, each has distinct national interests. Aligning their military efforts would require meticulous coordination and significant compromise. Such an alliance could yield substantial benefits, including optimized resource allocation, enhanced strategic coordination, and unified political messaging. However, challenges such as diverging national priorities, intricate diplomatic considerations, and the potential risk of Iranian retaliation make this path far from straightforward.

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Notably, Saudi Arabia and the UAE may still prefer to retain a degree of autonomy in their military operations, even within the framework of a broader coalition. The balance between collaboration and independence will remain a defining factor in shaping the feasibility and effectiveness of such an alliance.

The likelihood of a "coalition of the willing" approach—where nations such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt collaborate on critical operations as needed—appears to be the most pragmatic path forward. This strategy could be further strengthened through backchannel diplomacy to ensure that regional stakeholders remain aligned, despite their differing interests.

The recent Houthi attacks on shipping lanes, coupled with military responses from the U.S. and its allies, underscore the volatile and multifaceted nature of the situation. The Houthis' support for Palestinian factions and their ties to Iran add further complexity to an already tense geopolitical landscape. President Trump's call for more assertive measures against both the Houthis and their Iranian backers signals a potential shift toward a more hardline stance. However, the risk of escalation with Iran raises significant challenges for achieving a sustainable resolution. Addressing this requires a multifaceted strategy—one that combines military pressure, economic sanctions, and robust diplomatic engagement to counter the Houthi threat while addressing Iran's broader regional influence.