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The escalation in Yemen

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On July 13, 2026, the departure and landing runways at the Houthi-controlled Sana'a International Airport were targeted in an airstrike. The Saudi-backed Yemeni government claimed responsibility for the attack on the Houthi-held airport, saying it wanted to prevent an Iranian plane from landing.¹ Houthi-controlled areas were last targeted by the Saudi-led coalition before a UN-brokered truce to cease hostilities came into effect in 2022.² Following the strikes, the internationally recognized Yemeni government ordered all airports across the country shut down until further notice.³

Rashad al-Alimi, head of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council, confirmed that Iran explicitly requested permission for the Mahan Air flight. The flight was reportedly returning a Houthi delegation from Tehran following the funeral of Iran's late Supreme Leader.⁴

When the legitimate government denied the request, the Houthis and Iran defied the ruling, attempting to land the flight "outside of legal and sovereign frameworks". The Houthis and Iran used the travel of a political and religious delegation as a humanitarian and diplomatic cover. They bet that Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government would hesitate to strike or block a flight tied to such a highly sensitive political event.⁵

The primary goal of the strike was to prevent an unauthorized Iranian aircraft (Mahan Air) from landing in the Houthi-controlled capital. The legal government and its Saudi allies were determined that allowing the plane to land unhindered would mean completely surrendering control of Yemen's airspace and handing the Houthis the official powers of a legitimate state. Yemeni Information Minister Moammar al-Eryani stated that the decision to bomb the Sana'a runway was a vital, non-negotiable "sovereign position."⁶

Defense Minister Lt. Gen. Taher Al-Aqili announced that the armed forces would respond to any aircraft he described as "hostile" that violates Yemeni airspace "using all available means." He said the government had exhausted legal and diplomatic efforts to persuade Iran and the Houthi group not to operate flights outside the approved framework, but that the latest flight represented what he called "a challenge to international legitimacy." He held the Iranian regime legally and morally responsible for any escalation that may occur in the coming period.⁷

Blocked from landing at the damaged Sana'a runway, the Iranian flight rerouted and safely landed at Hodeidah Airport, a port city also under Houthi control on Yemen's Red Sea coast. After the Airbus A340-300 disembarked the Houthi delegation, the aircraft took off from the Red Sea port city and safely returned to Iranian airspace.

Yemeni Minister of Information Moammar Al-Eryani said that regarding the Iranian plane's landing at Hodeidah Airport, the government's success in this crisis should not be measured by where the aircraft landed, but rather by preventing Iran and the Houthis from achieving their objective of establishing Sana'a Airport as a permanent platform for Iranian flights outside state authority. Al-Eryani noted that "the decision to allow the aircraft to land at Hodeidah Airport was taken from a position of strength, after the state had demonstrated its readiness and ability to impose its will."⁸

The Houthi's al-Masirah TV had reported that "Saudi aggression targeted the departure and landing runways at the Sana'a international airport". Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree accused Saudi Arabia of "ending the de-escalation phase and bearing full responsibility for the consequences of its aggression. We affirm that this aggression will not go unanswered or unpunished".⁹ Tehran condemned the attack on

Sana'a airport, with a foreign ministry spokesperson describing it "as a clear violation of international law".¹⁰

For more than a decade, all flights into Houthi-controlled territory were required to route through neutral third-party hubs (such as Jordan) for mandatory security inspections to prevent the smuggling of arms and electronic components. Aircraft entering Yemeni airspace have needed prior clearance from the Saudi-led coalition that backs the government and says it enforces the restriction at its request. The Houthis appeared to have challenged this arrangement by organizing direct flights from Iran to Sana'a, angering the government and its backer.

The Houthi retaliation

Hours after the Houthis accused Saudi Arabia of attacking Sana'a airport the Houthis targeted Saudi Arabia .Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree said in a video statement that "in response to this criminal Saudi aggression, the Yemeni Armed Forces carried out a military operation targeting Abha International Airport, using a number of ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles". Saree in his statement also warned airlines against flying into Saudi airspace "until the blockade on Sana'a International Airport is lifted".¹¹

Saudi Arabia said it intercepted ballistic missiles fired at the Kingdom's south by the Iran-backed Houthi militia on July 13, 2026. The spokesperson for the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen Major General Turki Al-Maliki said that Saudi air defenses "have dealt with a threat from ballistic missiles launched by the terrorist Houthi militia toward the southern region."¹² No casualties were reported.¹³

On July 14, 2026 the Houthis said they shot down a Saudi-operated reconnaissance drone, as hostilities erupted a day earlier between the two sides for the first time in years. The fighters "succeeded in shooting down an enemy Saudi 'Wing Loong II' reconnaissance aircraft while it was carrying out hostile missions at dawn today over Al-Bayda Governorate in the center of the country," Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree said.¹⁴

It was the biggest flare-up in years between the two sides and the latest escalation threatens to unravel a truce that has been holding since April 2022 despite expiring, and comes at a time of heightened tensions as the United States and Iran trade attacks impacting the Gulf and traffic in the Strait of Hormuz.

The incident of July 3, 2026

On July 3 2026, an Iranian aircraft landed at the Sana'a airport. Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad al-Alimi said the plane belonged to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and described the incident as "an extremely dangerous development, a blatant violation of Yemeni sovereignty and a challenge to the international order."¹⁵ He also said the aircraft's tracking system had been repeatedly switched off over Yemeni airspace.

Speaking during a meeting in Riyadh with ambassadors from countries sponsoring Yemen's political process, al-Alimi said preliminary information confirmed that the flight was not humanitarian in nature. He said it was carrying Iranian military and security experts specialized in developing missiles and drones, as well as electronic technologies and communications equipment for command-and-control systems.¹⁶ He called for an independent international investigation and tougher sanctions on the Houthis.¹⁷

The latest escalation was triggered by the Iranian flight to Sana'a airport that rapidly evolved from an aviation dispute into a broader political and security crisis, exposing deep divisions between the warring sides and underscoring the regional dimensions of Yemen's long-running conflict. The dispute has been accompanied by an exchange of increasingly confrontational rhetoric, military mobilization along several front lines and warnings from both camps.¹⁸

The Houthi – Iranian plot

The landing of Iranian aircraft at Sana'a Airport was part of a coordinated Houthi-Iranian plan aimed at lifting the aerial blockade on airports in Houthi-controlled territories. The primary objective of this strategy was to force open a direct "air bridge" between Tehran and Sana'a, effectively bypassing the sovereignty of the UN-

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recognized Yemeni government and the restrictions enforced by the Saudi-led coalition.

On July 3, 2026, the Houthi Deputy Foreign Minister, Abdulwahid Abu Ras, praised Iran for “breaking the blockade imposed on Sana’a Airport” and the “Yemeni steadfastness that succeeded in breaking the hand of the Saudi aggressor.”¹⁹

On July 5, 2026, the Houthi Deputy Foreign Minister, Abdulwahid Abu Ras, met with the Iranian ambassador to Sana’a, Ali Mohammad Rezaei, to discuss cooperation between the Houthis and Iran, particularly efforts to break the blockade imposed on the Houthis. Abu Ras stated that “the Yemeni people” had decided to end “the aggression and the blockade and demand their legitimate rights” while taking “concrete steps at all levels.” During the meeting, the Iranian ambassador reaffirmed Iran’s support for the Houthis’ efforts to end “the aggression” and the blockade.²⁰

On July 7, 2026, Ali Akbar Velayati, the advisor to Iran’s Supreme Leader, met with a delegation on behalf of the Houthis and stated the blockade on Yemen must be lifted immediately and that its continued existence is unacceptable. The members of the Houthi delegation emphasized that they draw inspiration from the path of Iran’s leaders and the leaders of the “resistance” who were killed.²¹

According to al-Alimi and regional security experts, the strategic incentive for an air bridge between Iran and Sana'a is highly practical:

For years, Iran has supplied the Houthis via maritime smuggling routes stretching around Oman and the Horn of Africa. These naval routes are slow, expensive, and heavily vulnerable to Western and Saudi naval interdictions.

Direct cargo and passenger flights via Mahan Air—an airline heavily linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—would allow Tehran to swiftly fly military advisers, drone components, and missile Guidance systems directly into the heart of Yemen.

By establishing regular, uninspected direct flights, Iran and the Houthis aimed to force a routine, sovereign air route that neither Riyadh nor Aden could easily shut down without risking a war.

The US response

The State Department spokesperson said that: "The United States stands firmly with Saudi Arabia against Iranian aggression, including Iranian-supported Houthi attacks, and remains committed to the Kingdom's security and regional stability." The US-Saudi relationship remains a cornerstone of Washington's regional policy and the strategic partnership has only grown stronger under President Donald Trump. The State Department spokesperson also said ensuring freedom of navigation in the Red Sea remained a core national security interest for the US.

"It is critical to continue efforts to counter the Iran-backed Houthis and other terrorist groups in Yemen who threaten these US interests."²²

The response of the UN Security Council

Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad al-Alimi summoned the UN security council for an emergency meeting to discuss the latest developments. Al-Alimi accused Iran of seeking to use Yemen as a bargaining chip in its broader regional confrontation and called on the international community and the UN Security Council "to transition from the phase of condemnation to the phase of deterrence." al-Alimi said that Yemen would not allow any aircraft to violate its airspace.²³

The UN Security Council held an emergency meeting on July 13, 2026, to address escalations in and around Yemen, with member states lining up to condemn Iran's alleged support for the Houthis, and to express solidarity with Saudi Arabia after the militia launched ballistic missiles at the Kingdom.²⁴

Meanwhile, UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg urged both the Houthis and the Yemeni government to pursue diplomacy and avoid further escalation.²⁵

Briefing the council on humanitarian conditions in Yemen, the acting assistant secretary-general, Indrika Ratwatte, said more than 18 million Yemenis were hungry and 450 health facilities had closed in the past year alone amid

a catastrophic shortfall in aid funding, a crisis he warned could escalate sharply if regional tensions spilled further into the country.

Summary

Tensions between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia have abruptly re-escalated into direct military confrontation after the collapse of a fragile, four-year informal truce. On July 13, 2026, the Houthi movement fired a barrage of ballistic missiles and drones targeting Abha International Airport in southern Saudi Arabia, marking their first major attack on the kingdom since 2022.

High-ranking Houthi officials have threatened to launch a total "siege" on Saudi infrastructure and airports until restrictions on Sana'a International Airport are fully dismantled. This flare-up threatens to completely derail years of UN-backed peace negotiations. It heavily increases the risk of drawing Saudi Arabia back into a full-scale regional proxy war involving Iran and the United States.

Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad al-Alimi said he had instructed against expanding the confrontation in order to avoid fulfilling what he described as Iran's objective of dragging Yemen into conflicts that serve Tehran's interests.²⁶

Notes

¹ Yemen says it struck Sanaa airport to stop Iranian plane from landing, Al Arabiya, July 13, 2026.

² In major escalation, Yemen's Houthis target Saudi Arabia's Abha airport, the times of Israel, July 14, 2026.

³ Yemen government says attacked Sanaa airport to keep Iranian plane from landing, Ahram online, July 13, 2026.

⁴ In major escalation, Yemen's Houthis target Saudi Arabia's Abha airport, the times of Israel, July 14, 2026.

⁵ Iranian flights to Yemen are violation of sovereignty, says Yemeni official, the guardian, July 14, 2026.

⁶ Yemeni Information Minister to Asharq Al-Awsat: We Prevented Sanaa Airport from Becoming an Iranian Platform, Asharq Al Awsat, July 15, 2026.

⁷ Yemen Signals Military Action and Diplomatic Move Against Iran, Asharq Al Awsat, July 13, 2026.

⁸ Yemeni Information Minister to Asharq Al-Awsat: We Prevented Sanaa Airport from Becoming an Iranian Platform, Asharq Al Awsat, July 15, 2026.

⁹ Yemen government says attacked Sanaa airport to keep Iranian plane from landing, Ahram online, July 13, 2026.

¹⁰ Yemen govt says hit Sanaa airport, Houthis attack Saudi Arabia, Ahram online, July 13, 2026.

¹¹ Yemen government says hit Sanaa airport, Houthis attack Saudi Arabia, the new Arab, July 13, 2026.

¹² Saudi Arabia says it intercepted Houthi missiles fired at south, Arab news, July 13, 2026.

¹³ In major escalation, Yemen's Houthis target Saudi Arabia's Abha airport, the times of Israel, July 14, 2026.

¹⁴ Yemen's Houthis say shot down Saudi surveillance drone, The new Arab, July 14, 2026.

¹⁵ Al-Alimi calls for international investigation into IRGC plane landing in Sanaa, Al Arabiya, July 6, 2026.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Iran's mystery flight to Yemen: What do we know about the planes landing in Sana'a? – explainer, The Jerusalem post, July 14, 2026.

¹⁸ Yemen edges towards fresh fighting as fragile truce unravels, the Arab weekly, July 10, 2026.

¹⁹ Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt, Spotlight on Iran, Intelligence Research Institute, The Amit Terrorism and Intelligence Research Institute at the Israeli Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, July 1—8, 2026.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² US reaffirms support for Saudi Arabia after Houthi attacks, Al Arabiya, July 14, 2026.

²³ Yemen says it struck Sanaa airport to stop Iranian plane from landing, Al Arabiya, July 13, 2026.

²⁴ Security Council members rally behind Saudi Arabia, denounce Iran's role in Houthi escalations, Arab news, July 14, 2026.

²⁵ Yemen says it struck Sanaa airport to stop Iranian plane from landing, Al Arabiya, July 13, 2026.

²⁶ Yemen Leader Says Will Not Expand Confrontation after Airport Attack, Asharq Al Awsat, July 13, 2026.