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Issue Brief

The Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea: Impact on Yemen

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S*ummary*

In the midst of multiple crises, the involvement of Houthis in the Israel– Hamas War has further dampened the prospects of peace. The Israel– Hamas conflict has created new obstacles in the intra-Yemeni dialogue. The escalating tensions in the Red Sea have impacted the delivery of vital aid, as vessels carrying humanitarian supplies face increasing challenges. India recognises the Aden-based Presidential Leadership Council and has repeatedly appealed for a Yemeni-led and Yemeni-owned political process.

The involvement of the Houthis in the Israel– Hamas war has affected the progress of the negotiations between the internationally recognised government of Yemen and the Houthis. The intra-Yemeni dialogue which was advancing since the agreement between the government of Yemen and the Houthis in April 2022 and the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023, is now facing hurdles. The conflict has created new obstacles in the intra-Yemeni dialogue, slowing the pace of talks and further eroding trust among the parties. The delivery of humanitarian assistance to the people is also disrupted. The Houthis have detained a number of UN officials, diplomatic and international NGO staff working in Yemen. Besides, they have also seized ships and detained crew members who continue to be under Houthi custody. These developments are also worsening Yemen’s political, security and economic situation, making the prospects for peace more tenuous.

Yemen Peace Talks before the Israel– Hamas War

After long drawn out negotiations, in April 2022, a two-month UN-mediated ceasefire agreement was signed between the Yemeni government and the Houthis. The parties agreed to stop their military offensive, allow fuel ships to the Hodeida port, and resume flight operations from Sanaa to Egypt and Jordan.¹ As a result, the situation improved significantly, although sporadic instances of violence were still reported. The drop in instances of armed clashes and casualties was a positive and tangible achievement for Yemen since the beginning of the war in 2015. The agreement was renewed in June and August 2022 for two months each time. However, it could not be extended beyond October 2022 due to differences between the parties.

In March 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran signed a landmark normalisation agreement, which had a positive impact on the situation in Yemen. For the first time since the beginning of the Saudi-led military intervention in 2015, both Saudi Arabia and the Houthis showed a willingness to engage in dialogue and address their longstanding conflict. This led to several rounds of negotiations, including a visit by a Houthi delegation to Riyadh, where they met the Saudi Defence Minister. Saudi officials later described the discussions as positive, with both parties expressing optimism about reaching a mutually acceptable resolution to their disputes.

The internal security situation in Yemen also improved following the rapprochement, with a marked reduction in violence. The UN voiced its support for the talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, expressing hope that a comprehensive peace agreement could be achieved. The engagement between Saudi Arabia and the

¹ [“United Nations Initiative for a Two-Month Truce”](#), Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, April 2022.

Houthis was seen as a crucial step towards resolving the conflict in Yemen and stabilising the region.

In April 2023, around 900 prisoners were released from both sides, after the Government of Yemen and the Houthis agreed to a prisoner swap deal. In the same month, Saudi and Omani officials visited Sanaa and held mediatory discussions with the stakeholders. In September 2023, a Houthi delegation visited Riyadh for the first time, since the beginning of the war in Yemen, for discussion with the Saudi officials. At a time when it looked like the peace talks were moving in the right direction, Hamas launched a terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, and subsequently Israel declared war on Hamas and attacked Gaza.

Houthi Attacks and Its Impact on Yemen

As the war broke out between Israel and Hamas, the Houthis declared their support for Palestine and joined the war against Israel. They started targeting the commercial ships in the Red Sea, which they believed were linked to Israel. Later, they targeted ships in the Red Sea, which were not linked to Israel at all. This created tensions in the waters of the Red Sea. A 20-nation military coalition led by the US named ‘Operation Prosperity Guardian’ was formed to ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. The UK and the US, since then, have undertaken several attacks on the Houthi targets inside Yemen. The Operation Prosperity Guardian has been successful to a large extent in deterring Houthi attacks on the vessels in the Red Sea.

The Houthis launched several rockets and UAVs towards Israel. Some of them have hit their targets in the southern port city of Eilat. As a result of the attacks, the operations at the Eilat port have been closed since November 2023.² In a major retaliatory attack, Israel hit an oil facility in Hodeida. The Houthis have only limited capability to hurt Israel physically, but their involvement in the War has affected the peace process in Yemen significantly.

Mediation and diplomacy

There is a growing concern among the regional stakeholders and the UN that the Houthi involvement in the war could jeopardise the progress made so far in the Yemeni peace process since April 2022. The UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, expressed his apprehension that the Yemeni peace talks should not be a ‘collateral damage’ of the Israel–Hamas war.³ The UN has urged the Houthis to

² [“Houthi Attacks on Israel Impact Eilat Port, International Trade, and Maritime Security”](#), *Jerusalem Post*, 31 May 2024.

³ [“Briefing by the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, to the Security Council”](#), Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 15 April 2024.

adhere to the agreements made and de-escalate the tensions to prevent any negative impact on the peace process in Yemen. In the March 2024 UN Security Council Monthly Forecast for Yemen, Grundberg stated that the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have “stalled—and risk upending—Yemen’s peace talks”.⁴ He also noted that there is a growing armed clashes and violence in Yemen.

In December 2023, after a number of parleys in Saudi Arabia and Oman, Yemeni parties committed to a ceasefire and agreed to a roadmap. Elements of this roadmap included resumption of oil exports (a major source of revenue for the economy), payment of salaries of civil servants, opening of roads in Taiz and easing restrictions on Sanaa Airport and the Hodeida port.⁵ But in March 2024, as the Houthis stepped up their attacks in the Red Sea, the Yemeni government suspended the implementation of this roadmap.

The internationally recognised government of Yemen has severely condemned the activities of the Houthis in the Red Sea. It has described the Houthi attack on the ships in the Red Sea as “systematic terrorism” and says that the Houthi actions would lead to economic and environmental disaster in the region.⁶ The Yemeni government alleges that by escalating attacks in the Red Sea, the Houthis have undermined the ongoing political process in the country. It also accuses Iran of supplying weapons to the Houthis which leads to the worsening of humanitarian crisis.⁷ Besides, the Yemeni government accuses the Houthis of imposing an economic siege as the number of ships carrying humanitarian assistance to Yemen has decreased as well.⁸

There is a fundamental difference in the thinking between the Yemeni government and the Houthis. While the Yemeni government believes that the State and its institutions must be strengthened to provide security and humanitarian access to the people, the Houthis do not want to lose control of the areas and cede any authority to the former.

The US, while remaining engaged in the peace process, has taken military action against the Houthis for their disruptive activities in the Red Sea. In January 2024, as the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea increased, the US announced the designation

⁴ [“March 2024 Monthly Forecast”](#), UN Security Council Report, 29 February 2024.

⁵ [“Update on Efforts to Secure a UN Roadmap to End the War in Yemen”](#), Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 23 December 2023.

⁶ [“Al-Eryani: The Houthi Militia's Escalation of Attacks on Oil Tankers Reveals Its Terrorist Nature”](#), *Yemen News Agency*, 3 September 2024.

⁷ [“Red Sea Crisis, Gaza Conflict Pose Threat to Progress, Stability in Yemen, Speakers Tell Security Council”](#), United Nations, 15 April 2014.

⁸ [“Concentric Circles of Escalation, Risky Military Adventurism in Red Sea Could Spark New War Cycle in Yemen, Special Envoy Warns, Urging Maximum Restraint”](#), United Nations, 14 March 2014.

of the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group. For the US, Houthi attacks on the vessels in the Red Sea are acts of terrorism.⁹ The US states that these attacks must stop for the peace talks to progress without any hurdles. The US has stated that the Houthi attacks have not only affected the regional countries but the Yemeni people as well. It has expressed its apprehension that the escalation in the region will have a negative impact on the peace talks in Yemen.

Oman and Saudi Arabia share land borders with Yemen and have significant stakes in the resolution of the conflict. Saudi Arabia, having fought a prolonged military campaign against the Houthis since 2015, finds itself in a complex geopolitical and security situation. Despite the recent escalation in the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia has refrained from taking a more forceful stance against the Houthis. This delicate balancing act reflects the nuanced position of Saudi Arabia towards the conflict in its neighbourhood. Saudi position can be understood from the fact that it has engaged with the Houthis in negotiations and does not want any military confrontation which would derail the achievements made in this regard.

Oman has been mediating between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis and making diplomatic efforts to reach a political solution. Muscat has condemned the Israeli attack on the Houthis stating that it will further escalate and complicate the situation. In response to the Houthi attacks, the US and the UK launched a number of rocket and UAV attacks on the Houthi military targets inside Yemen. Oman has condemned these targeted attacks and expressed its concern over the attacks by “friendly countries”.¹⁰ Despite the deteriorating situation and involvement of the Houthis in the war against Israel, Oman and Saudi Arabia want to preserve the progress made in their engagement with the Houthis.

Internal security and stability

Apart from the attack on vessels in the Red Sea, the Houthis have undertaken several provocative actions which threaten to derail the relative peace achieved in the country since April 2022. There are reports of increasing mobilisation of troops and occurrence of violent armed clashes in several parts of the country and the overall security environment remains unpredictable. This can potentially flare up the situation and seriously deteriorate the conditions.

In June 2024, the Houthis seized three Yemenia Airlines planes in Sanaa. This resulted in hundreds of pilgrims getting stranded in Riyadh as these planes would

⁹ [“Special Briefing by Timothy A. Lenderking, US Special Envoy for Yemen”](#), US Department of State, 3 April 2024.

¹⁰ [“Oman Condemns American-British Bombing in Yemen”](#), Foreign Ministry of Oman, 12 January 2024.

have carried them back home. The Yemeni government accused the Houthis of escalation while the Houthis alleged the government of ‘plundering the company’s revenues’.¹¹

In June 2024, Houthis detained 11 UN personnel from different parts of the country. They have also abducted a number of Yemenis working for humanitarian organisations and aid agencies in Yemen. The Houthis suspect the involvement of these people in an espionage network providing vital military intelligence to the US and Israel.¹² Despite the appeal from the UN Secretary-General for their unconditional release, the Houthis have still kept them hostage.

On 3 August, Houthis seized the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) headquarters in Sanaa. After more than two weeks, they handed the office back to the UN on 19 August. Such unilateral and provocative actions by the Houthis at a time when substantial gains have been achieved are major challenges for re-establishing peace and stability in the country. It also creates impediments to the smooth delivery of humanitarian assistance to the millions of Yemenis who are in dire need of aid for their survival.

Economic impact

Yemen’s economy remains highly fragile and reviving economic life is a priority for the country. Political unity and stability of the country is necessary to revive the economy. With the Houthi attacks on the Red Sea and slowed down peace talks, the economy of the country continues to suffer. Oil exports, a major revenue source, have been severely impacted by the prolonged conflict in the country. Due to the damage to the oil infrastructure during the war and the absence of foreign investment in the energy sector, Yemen’s economy has been deeply affected. Infrastructure throughout the country remains damaged and needs to be rebuilt. In such a bleak economic condition, the Houthi involvement in the Israel– Hamas war presents an additional obstacle further hindering Yemen's prospects for economic recovery.

In July 2024, a significant step forward was made as both parties reached an agreement to cooperate on two critical issues: Yemenia Airways and the country’s banking sector. Both sides agreed to implement measures aimed at unifying the Yemeni Central Bank, a crucial step for economic stabilisation. Additionally, they agreed to resume air connectivity to Jordan, Egypt and India.¹³ These two recent

¹¹ [“Hundreds of Yemen Pilgrims Stuck in KSA after Houthis Seize Yemenia Planes”](#), *Arab News*, 29 June 2024.

¹² [“Yemeni Minister Says Houthis Abducted 70 Yemenis, Including 18 UN Staff”](#), *Arab News*, 8 June 2024.

¹³ [“Statement by the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen”](#), Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 23 July 2024.

developments mark important progress towards restoring essential services and improving the economic landscape in the country.

Humanitarian concerns

Over a decade of instability in Yemen has resulted in a humanitarian crisis, with more than 18.2 million people, including 9.8 million children, in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.¹⁴ The ongoing civil war has disrupted education, leaving millions of children out of school. Diseases such as cholera have spread across large parts of the country. The escalating tensions in the Red Sea have further impacted the delivery of vital aid, as vessels carrying humanitarian supplies face increasing challenges. At this critical juncture, a nationwide ceasefire and a consensus on a national roadmap for the future political process are essential to stabilise the country and address its pressing needs. The escalation by the Houthis significantly hampers the aid delivery to the people.

India’s Concerns

India is highly concerned about the recent developments in the Red Sea and Yemen. India has huge economic and strategic interests in the safety and security of the Sea lines of Communication in the Red Sea, the Strait of Bab el Mandab and the Gulf of Aden. Any disruption to this vital maritime route affects India’s economy and security. Besides, India remains wary of the potential resurgence of piracy off the Somali coast. India has maintained a continuous naval presence in the Gulf of Aden since 2008 to counter piracy activities. Indian Navy has provided security to a large number of commercial vessels passing in the region from piracy attacks.¹⁵ Further, a large number of international commercial vessels have Indian crew members who often face difficulties when the ships are seized or hijacked. This is another area of concern for India.

Throughout the crisis in Yemen, India has supported the government and the people of the country. India has provided food, medicines and other humanitarian aid to Yemen. India is also concerned with the activities of terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS in Yemen who get a safe haven because of the conducive environment in the country.¹⁶

¹⁴ [“UNICEF Yemen Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1 - January to March 2024”](#), UNICEF, 19 May 2014.

¹⁵ [“Indian Navy Foils Another Piracy Attempt Off Somalia Coast; 11 Iranian, 8 Pak Nationals Rescued”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 2 February 2024.

¹⁶ [“Arria-formula Meeting on Yemen”](#), Statement by Ambassador K. Nagaraj Naidu, Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of India to the UN, 3 December 2020.

Presently, India recognises the Aden-based Presidential Leadership Council. India has repeatedly appealed for a Yemeni-led and Yemeni-owned political process to build a future roadmap for the country.¹⁷ A united and stable Yemen is a positive for India from political, economic and security viewpoints. After a long gap, India has now appointed a non-resident ambassador to Yemen. On its part, India has always offered to provide all possible support to Yemen in navigating the crisis. There is a huge potential for economic engagement with Yemen, which could be explored once the situation stabilises.

An Uncertain Future

Yemen is facing multiple crises, and the involvement of Houthis in the Israel– Hamas War has further dampened the prospects of peace. The situation in the Red Sea, aggravated by the Houthi attacks, has added further complexity to the mediation efforts and weakened the potential for a peaceful resolution in Yemen. The Houthis’ actions in the Red Sea have also raised doubts among mediators regarding their commitment to the peace process, deepening the trust deficit. While the UN, along with the US, Saudi Arabia and Oman, has played a pivotal role in bringing the Yemeni parties to the negotiating table and achieving a relative calm, there is a growing concern that the Houthis’ involvement in the Israel– Hamas War could undermine years of diplomatic efforts aimed at restoring peace and unity in Yemen.

¹⁷ [“Remarks by Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations”](#), Permanent Mission of India to the UN, 14 January 2021.

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