

Maritime security: Situation in the Red Sea and EU response

The Iran-backed Houthi militia, which controls large parts of Yemen, has attacked numerous commercial ships in the Red Sea since mid-November 2023 'in solidarity with the Palestinians'. This poses a significant threat to the global economy, and has led to an escalation of tensions in the Middle East. The United States has launched an international operation in the Red Sea to protect commercial vessels and keep this vital shipping route open, and the EU granted preliminary support to its own mission on 16 January 2024. On 12 January, the US and United Kingdom launched direct strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen. The Houthis have vowed to retaliate.

Background: Situation in the Red Sea

The Houthis are a [local militia group](#) in Yemen. They have risen to power following the devastating civil war there, which started in 2014 and has left almost 400 000 dead. The Houthis have effectively won the civil war and now control the west of the country, the Red Sea coastline and the capital, Sana'a. The Houthis, who are a part of Iran's '[axis of resistance](#)' – a network of Iranian proxies and allies in the Middle East coordinated by the Iranian Quds Force – have vowed to continue attacks on commercial ships '[with Israeli interests](#)' until the [war in Gaza](#) ends. They have also [fired](#) missiles at Israeli territory. In practice, however, these attacks – [28 so far](#) – are arbitrary, according to experts. Iran has [deployed](#) a warship to the Red Sea, praised the Houthis for 'supporting Palestinians and standing up to Israel', and is allegedly aiding them by providing [intelligence](#) and [weapons](#).

With 20 % of global container traffic [passing](#) through the Red Sea (and the adjacent Suez Canal), it is one of the world's most important shipping lanes, connecting Asia to Europe; 40 % of trade between the two continents passes through it. Any persistent disruption to trade in these shipping lanes could cause costs to rise globally. This is especially true for the energy sector, which depends on the Red Sea and the Suez Canal for transit of almost 8 % of liquefied natural gas and 10 % of seaborne oil. The attacks are already having wide-ranging effects. Major shipping companies such as MSC and Maersk have started [circumnavigating](#) Africa and the Cape of Good Hope, instead of transiting the Red Sea. As a result, the number of ships passing through the Red Sea has decreased by more than 40 %. Circumnavigation adds an estimated one to two weeks to journeys, and leads to 'longer transit times, more fuel spent, more ships required', and [increasing](#) the cost of shipping and of shipped goods, with costs also passed onto consumers. Shipping insurance costs have [skyrocketed](#).

In response to the attacks, in December 2023, the United States launched Operation Prosperity Guardian ([OPG](#)), [bringing together](#) countries including Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Singapore, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. However, some countries have since distanced themselves from the operation amid [worries](#) that it could increase tensions and further escalate the conflict in the Middle East. The French navy is also operating in the area, but not under the OPG umbrella. OPG's objective is to support regional security while preserving the freedom of navigation for all nations; it has already [foiled](#) several Houthi attacks. On 12 January 2024, the US and the UK, supported by other allied nations, started direct [strikes](#) on Houthi targets in Yemen, following which the Houthis vowed to retaliate. On 15 January, the Houthis fired a missile at an [American destroyer](#), the USS Laboon. Iran has condemned the US and UK airstrikes as a 'clear violation of the territorial integrity of Yemen'.

On 10 January 2024, the United Nations Security Council adopted a [resolution](#) denouncing 'in the strongest terms' the repeated assaults by the Houthi rebels off the coast of Yemen.

Figure 1 – Red Sea



Source: [The Economist](#).



EU response

The EU has repeatedly [condemned](#) the Houthi attacks on commercial ships for threatening 'international navigation and maritime security, in grave contravention of international law', and [welcomed](#) the UN Security Council resolution. Within the framework of the EU's broader efforts to find a peaceful solution to the situation in Gaza and prevent the conflict from spilling over into a full-blown regional conflict, Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission, has [visited](#) several countries in the Middle East. During his visits, he has addressed the [alarming situation](#) in the Red Sea.

Several EU [Member States](#) are already contributing to the US-led OPG. In late December 2023, the EU started [considering](#) sending its own mission to the Red Sea. There are broadly two tools at the EU's disposal. One option is to set up an ad hoc mission with the participation of Member States to safeguard and escort merchant ships as they cross the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait to enter the Red Sea. While it has been suggested Operation Atalanta (see box) could be expanded to include other tasks, including on the coast of the Red Sea, the High Representative has noted that Spain, which currently contributes to Atalanta, is against this because, in Madrid's opinion, 'these are two completely different things that deserve to be treated differently'. Spain has [demanded](#) the formation of a separate European mission to patrol the region and defend European interests. In addition to operations, a further tool at the EU's disposal is a 'coordinated maritime presence' ([CMP](#)). It is important to note that a CMP is distinct from an EU common security and defence policy (CSDP) mission, and the operations and assets deployed in the Gulf of Guinea under the CMP are 'under national command' and provided on a voluntary basis.

EU Member States offered [preliminary support](#) on 16 January 2024 for the establishment of an EU naval operation to protect ships in the Red Sea against attacks by the Houthis. The EU's Political and Security Committee supports the proposal put forward by Josep Borrell to establish 'a new EU operation', which will 'act in a broader area of operation, from the Red Sea to the Gulf'. The French-led [Agenor](#) mission is expected to serve as the foundation for the new mission. Agenor is the military track of the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) – outside the CSDP framework. It provides enhanced surveillance capabilities in the entire Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and a part of the Arabian Sea. Its aim is 'to ensure a safe navigation environment, contribute to de-escalation of tensions and facilitate an inclusive, regional dialogue in the Strait of Hormuz'. Seven out of nine participating nations in EMASoH are represented in AGENOR: Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway. Germany and Portugal are involved only in the diplomatic track (EMASoH). The next step is for EU foreign ministers to [discuss](#) the new mission on 22 January, so as to establish it by 19 February at the latest.

European Parliament position

The European Parliament has repeatedly stressed that stability, maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden are [essential](#). It has frequently [underlined](#) the importance of safeguarding freedom of navigation around the world and adherence to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Members have [argued](#) that the EU must strengthen its role as a global maritime security provider. Parliament has lauded the CMPs and the contributions of CSDP naval operations to maritime security. In December 2023, the first official European Parliament visit to Yemen since 2009 took place. Participants [expressed](#) their backing for UN-led efforts aimed at reaching a comprehensive settlement of the Yemen conflict, as well as for the efforts of the internationally recognised government of Yemen. They reiterated Parliament's unwavering support for the people of Yemen and for efforts to uphold the nation's unity, independence and territorial integrity.

Operation Atalanta

The EU Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) [Operation Atalanta](#) was first [deployed](#) in 2008, and its mandate was [extended](#) in December 2022 until December 2024. In March 2022, the UN Security Council [did not extend](#) Resolution 2608 (2021) allowing EU NAVFOR Atalanta and other international forces to fight piracy and armed robbery in Somalia's territorial waters. In spite of this, Atalanta maintains a wide [area of operation](#) – covering the Gulf of Suez, the Gulf of Aqaba, the Red Sea, the Somali Basin and the Gulf of Aden. Operation Atalanta's [ships and aircraft](#) protect vulnerable vessels in these waters, in particular those of the World Food Programme delivering food aid, by countering piracy and armed robbery at sea. Atalanta [shares](#) maritime awareness information with OPG.