

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. The EU launched its own 'purely defensive' mission, EUNAVFOR Operation ASPIDES, on 19 February 2024.

Background: Situation in the Red Sea

A [local militia group](#) in Yemen, the Houthis rose to power following the devastating civil war, which started in 2014 and has left almost 400 000 dead. The Houthis effectively won the civil war and now control the west of the country, the Red Sea coast 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 Israel. Experts consider these attacks to be arbitrary, however. 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](#). Iran-backed militants [attacked](#) a remote US base in Jordan in January 2024 with a drone, leaving three US soldiers dead and over 40 injured. Iran has [denied](#) involvement.

With 20 % of global container traffic and 40 % of Asia-Europe trade [transiting](#) the Red Sea (and the adjacent Suez Canal), it is one of the world's most important shipping lanes. 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 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 50 %. Circumnavigation adds an estimated one to two weeks to journeys, and leads to 'longer transit times, more fuel spent, more ships required', and [increases](#) the cost of shipping and of shipped goods, with costs also passed onto consumers. Shipping insurance costs have [skyrocketed](#).

In response to the attacks, the United States launched Operation Prosperity Guardian ([OPG](#)) in December 2023, [bringing together](#) countries including, inter alia, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Singapore, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. Sources indicate that half of the allies have [chosen](#) to remain anonymous, despite the Pentagon's claims of a coordinated effort involving 20 countries. Some of the partners will provide only minimal staffing. Some countries have since distanced themselves from the operation amid [concerns](#) that it could increase tensions and further escalate the conflict in the Middle East. The OPG 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, which failed to reduce Houthi attacks on commercial shipping. On 18 February 2024, Houthi missiles [struck](#) a UK-owned cargo ship, which became the first ship to be sunk by Houthi attacks.

On 10 January 2024, the United Nations Security Council adopted a [resolution](#) (UNSCR 2722) denouncing the repeated assaults by the Houthi rebels off the coast of Yemen 'in the strongest terms'. It acknowledges

Figure 1 – Red Sea



Source: [The Economist](#).



the right to defend vessels against such attacks in accordance with international law. At the beginning of March 2024, it [emerged](#) that undersea cables in the Red Sea, which impact 25 % of traffic between Asia and Europe, had been cut. However it is unclear whether these were [sabotaged](#) by Houthis. The Houthis have [claimed](#) responsibility for three deaths in an attack on a merchant ship on 6 March 2024, the first fatal attack since the group started attacking ships in the Red Sea.

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. The HRVP has also [proposed](#) a 10-point peace plan to end the Israel-Palestine conflict, however, according to the media, regional and Member State buy-in is questionable.

On 19 February 2024, the EU [launched](#) EUNAVFOR Operation [ASPIDES](#). [Established](#) on 8 February 2024, ASPIDES will [help](#) 'to safeguard maritime security and ensure freedom of navigation, especially for merchant and commercial vessels'. Within its defensive mandate (to [dissociate](#) itself from OPG's conduct of strikes on Yemeni territory, which some EU countries see as ['escalatory'](#)), ASPIDES 'will provide maritime situational awareness, accompany vessels, and protect them against possible multi-domain attacks at sea'. It acts in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2722 (see above). It [protects](#) shipping targeted by attacks at sea or air, but will not conduct strikes on land. Its area of operations spans from the Red Sea to the Gulf and includes a large part of the North-West Indian Ocean, more specifically 'along the main sea lines of communication in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Strait of Hormuz, as well as international waters in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Gulf'. At the time of writing, it included five naval and one aerial asset and has an initial mandate of one year. Operation ASPIDES coordinates closely with EUNAVFOR ATALANTA (see box), Operation Prosperity Guardian (see above), and other like-minded partners. An initial option of basing ASPIDES on the French-led [Agenor](#) mission was abandoned, owing to a [lack](#) of agreement from the Gulf countries. At the time of writing, the [Italian](#), [German](#), [Belgian](#), [French](#) and [Hellenic](#) navies have contributed naval assets, with other EU countries [contributing](#) staff officers to the operational headquarters. The operational headquarters is the [Hellenic European Union Operations HQ](#) located in Larissa (Greece). Some €8 million from the European Peace Facility has been mobilised for the common costs of ASPIDES, with the rest covered by Member States.

European Parliament position

The European Parliament has [expressed](#) strong condemnation of the ongoing attacks by Iran-backed Houthis on maritime activities in the Red Sea and commended the Member States' decision to establish EUNAVFOR Operation ASPIDES to protect merchant vessels, enhance maritime situational awareness and escort vessels to deter attacks. The Parliament has repeatedly stressed that stability, maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden are [essential](#). Members have [argued](#) that the EU must strengthen its role as a global maritime security provider. The first official European Parliament visit to Yemen since 2009 took place in December 2023. 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.

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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.