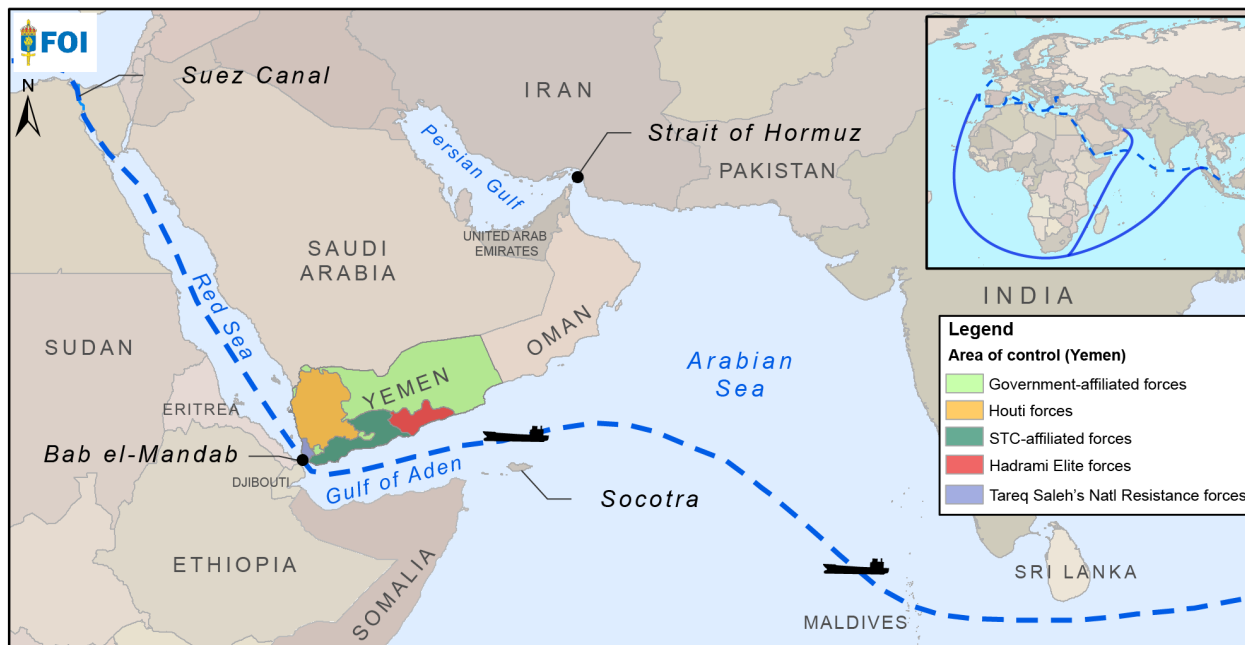


## INTERNATIONAL MILITARY MISSIONS

# A Preliminary Analysis of Naval Operations in the Red Sea: Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian

Malin Karlsson



**Map 1.** Per Wikström, FOI.

**Source:** Maps inspired by Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies (2024), The Yemen Annual Review 2023; Raydan, N. (2023), Houthi Ship Attacks Are Affecting Red Sea Trade Routes", Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

A MARITIME CRISIS IS unfolding in the region comprising the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Houthis, a militant Yemeni group, are attacking international commercial shipping. As a response to the Houthis, the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) have formed separate maritime initiatives, Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian, respectively. Two sets of dynamics could influence these operations' goal of achieving maritime security in the region. The first set relates to the operational mandates, leadership, and division of labour. The second concerns the broader conflict situation in Yemen, including the risk of underestimating the Houthis' capacity and endurance, as well as misinterpreting their motives. Combined, these dynamics raise an important strategic question: How can the EU and the US establish maritime security in the region without escalating their engagement and protracting the Yemeni conflict?<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this snapshot analysis is to highlight a number of strategic questions that are likely to remain relevant as the US-led Operation Guardian and the EU operation, Aspides, evolve. To achieve this aim, the analysis focuses on the dynamics influencing their development. Because of the evolving situation, the analysis below is based on events that have been unfolding until late February 2024.

The analysis first provides a brief overview of the maritime situation in the region and of the two operations in question: Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian. Subsequently, the operational dynamics and the conflict dynamics that may influence the operational responses are presented. Finally, there is a discussion surrounding the dynamics that shape the operations, raising a number of strategic questions for consideration.

<sup>1</sup> This memo is produced within FOI's project on International Military Missions, commissioned by the Swedish Ministry of Defence. The author is grateful to Jan Frelin, Aron Lund, and colleagues at FOI for their feedback on an earlier version of the text.

## THE MARITIME SITUATION IN THE REGION

Since November 2023, the Houthis have accelerated an international crisis in an already geopolitically tense region. The group is attacking international commercial vessels in the region of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in response to the war in Gaza, specifically threatening any commercial vessel with links to Israel. Between November 19, 2023, and February 14, 2024, there were 46 Houthi attacks against commercial vessels.<sup>2</sup> Most attacks missed their targets or were intercepted by international navies. At least 55 states have direct connections to the attacked ships.<sup>3</sup>

The states directly impacted by the attacks are concerned as some of their citizens' lives are put in jeopardy. Other states, such as the US, worry that the attacks may affect their geo-strategical positioning. Prior to the current crisis, there had been increasing international maritime presence in and around the region due to its geopolitical importance.<sup>4</sup>

Most states reliant on international shipping are anxious about the added costs to the shipping industry, which in turn could influence energy prices and inflation rates.<sup>5</sup> As a route for crude oil, the Gulf of Aden channels 12 per cent of the world's seaborne trade.<sup>6</sup> Reports suggest that commercial traffic through the Gulf of Aden has decreased by 42 per cent since the Houthis' attacks.<sup>7</sup> Due to the attacks, several shipping companies have rerouted their traffic around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope. The rerouting has added another 10 to 15 days to shipping times, while shipment costs have increased by up to 400 per cent.<sup>8</sup>

As a response to the Houthis and as alleged acts of self-defence, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) have carried out pre-emptive air raids against the Houthis under Operation Poseidon Archer.

Consequently, the Houthis have considered ships associated with the US and UK as legitimate targets.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to Poseidon Archer, the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian and the EU-mandated operation, Aspides, are restricted to defensive tasks. This analysis is limited to these defensive operations. Another limitation of the analysis is that it does not consider responses by individual states, such as India.<sup>10</sup>

## The US' response: Operation Prosperity Guardian

On December 18, 2023, as a response to the Houthis, the US Department of Defense announced the multinational naval initiative, Operation Prosperity Guardian. The objective of the operation is ensuring freedom of navigation and regional security.<sup>11</sup> The operation is focusing on escorting, patrolling, and defending commercial vessels.<sup>12</sup>

Operation Prosperity Guardian was established under Task Force 153 of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). The CMF is a multi-naval partnership operating in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and Indian Ocean.<sup>13</sup> Task Force 153 was launched on April 17, 2022, with headquarters in Bahrain. Established as a reaction to previous Houthi attacks, the task force concentrates on maritime security, capacity building, and preventing the Houthis from obtaining weapons.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the task force, Operation Prosperity Guardian required a "sustained presence" in the region and, for this specific task, needed a declaration of (re)commitment from the various states involved in the Combined Maritime Forces.<sup>15</sup> Participation in the operation could include providing staff or materiel, such as warships.<sup>16</sup>

While launching the operation, the US Department of Defense announced 20 contributing states.<sup>17</sup> However, it is still unclear who all the states are, as some have not

2 Seligman, L., Ward, A., and Toosi, N. (2024), "UAE restricts US ability to launch retaliatory airstrikes against Iran proxies", *POLITICO*, February 14.

3 US Department of Defence (2024), *NAVCENT Commander Vice Admiral Brad Cooper Holds an Off-Camera, On-The-Record Press Briefing via Teleconference on Operation Prosperity Guardian*, Briefing, January 4.

4 Hellquist, E. and Neuman Bergenwall, S. (2023), *Managing Security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden – The Red Sea Council and the Prospect of Multilateralism*, Swedish Defence Research Agency.

5 Borger, J. (2024), "Strikes on Houthis could bring Biden closer to the regional war he sought to avoid", *The Guardian*, January 12.

6 Jones, M.G. (2024), "EU launches mission Aspides to protect Red Sea vessels from Houthi attacks", *Euronews*, February 19.

7 UNCTAD (2024), *UNCTAD raises alarms on escalating disruptions to global trade due to the geopolitical tensions and climate change affecting the world's key trade routes*, January 26.

8 Al Jazeera (2024), "EU launches Red Sea naval mission to protect shipping from Houthi attacks", February 19.

9 Reuters (2024), "Yemen's Houthis say they will target US ships", January 16.

10 For an overview, see Neuman Bergenwall, S. (2024), *När flaggan följer handeln – Indiska flottan spänner musklerna i arabiska vatten*, The Swedish Defence Research Agency.

11 US Department of Defense (2023), *Statement from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea*, December 18.

12 US Department of Defence (2024), *NAVCENT Commander Vice Admiral Brad Cooper Holds an Off-Camera*.

13 Combined Maritime Forces (n.d.), *A 41-nation naval partnership*, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/>

14 Mosly, A. (2023), "Enhancing Cooperation on Maritime Security in the Gulf", *Gulf Research Center*.

15 US Department of Defence (2024), *NAVCENT Commander Vice Admiral Brad Cooper Holds an Off-Camera*, January 4.

16 Stewart, P., Latona, D. and Amante, A. (2023), "US allies reluctant on Red Sea task force", *Reuters*, December 28.

17 Ibid.

made their contributions public. Currently, the UK and Denmark are the known contributors of warships to the operation.<sup>18</sup> According to the Department of Defense, the states who have agreed to join the operation include Australia, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, and Spain.<sup>19</sup> Later, France, Italy and Spain declared that they would refrain from joining.<sup>20</sup>

### The EU's response: Aspides

On February 19, 2024, the EU launched operation Aspides under its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Its objective is to uphold the EU's presence in the area of the attacks "with the aim of ensuring freedom of navigation for vessels, in close cooperation with like-minded maritime security providers".<sup>21</sup> The operation is defensive in nature and will not perform

pre-emptive attacks on targets in Yemen, but has the right to self-defence.<sup>22</sup> The mandate extends to escorting and protecting commercial vessels, monitoring and assessing threats, and information-sharing with other relevant actors.<sup>23</sup>

Aspides will be in force for one year, with the possibility of an extension. Greece is providing the operational commander, as well as the headquarters, situated in Larissa. The operation has four frigates and one "aerial asset".<sup>24</sup> France, Germany, Italy, and Belgium have announced that they will provide warships to Aspides.<sup>25</sup> There is also a possibility for non-EU states to participate in the operation.<sup>26</sup> The next section analyses how Operation Prosperity Guardian and Aspides, in their current forms, could be facing similar operational dynamics as previous maritime operations in and around the region.

**Table 1.** Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian.

	Aspides	Operation Prosperity Guardian
<i>Organisation</i>	Under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy.	Under CMF-CTF153.
<i>Aim</i>	Defensive: ensuring freedom of navigation for commercial vessels in close cooperation with like-minded maritime security providers.	Defensive: securing safe passage for commercial vessels.
<i>Means</i>	France, Germany, Italy, and Belgium provide warships. Greece has operational command and HQ. <sup>(a)</sup> Sweden is providing staff officers. <sup>(b)</sup>	US, <sup>(c)</sup> UK, and Denmark provide warships. Staff officers from Australia, <sup>(d)</sup> Canada, <sup>(e)</sup> the Netherlands, <sup>(f)</sup> Norway, <sup>(g)</sup> and Singapore. <sup>(h)</sup>
<i>Participants</i>	Belgium, France, Greece, Germany, Italy, and Sweden. <sup>(i)</sup>	Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, Singapore, UK, and US. <sup>(j)</sup>
<i>Headquarters</i>	Larissa, Greece	Bahrain

**Remarks:** **(a)** Al Jazeera (2024), "EU launches". **(b)** Swedish Government (2024), Svenska stabsofficerare skickas till Röda havet, February 22. **(c)** These are the named contributors. It is unclear exactly how and when these states will contribute. **(d)** Australian Minister of Defence (2023), Radio interview, ABC RN Breakfast with Sally Sara, December 22. **(e)** Government of Canada (2023), Canada to participate in United States-led Operation PROSPERITY GUARDIAN, December 19. **(f)** Dutch News (2023), "Dutch provide two staff officers to Red Sea protection plan", December 19. **(g)** Norwegian Government (2023), Norway increases support to Combined Maritime Forces in the Red Sea, December 21. **(h)** The Ministry of Defence Singapore (2024), Media Reply – SAF Not Involved in Strikes on Houthis in Yemen, January 13. **(i)** At the time of writing, states are still considering contributing to the operation. **(j)** As some contributors are unknown, this is not an exhaustive list.

18 Danish Defence (2024), *The frigate Iver Huitfeldt to protect shipping*, January 30.

19 US Department of Defense (2023), *Statement from Secretary of Defense*.

20 Reuters (2023), "What is U.S.-led Red Sea coalition and which countries are backing it?", December 22.

21 Council of the European Union (2024), *COUNCIL DECISION on a European Union maritime security operation to safeguard freedom of navigation in relation to the Red Sea crisis (EUNAVFOR ASPIDES)*, February 6.

22 Ibid.

23 European Union External Action Service (2024) *EUNAVFOR OPERATION ASPIDE*, February, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EUNAVFOR%20OPERATION%20ASPIDES\\_2024.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EUNAVFOR%20OPERATION%20ASPIDES_2024.pdf).

24 Ibid.

25 Jones, M.G. (2024), "EU launches mission Aspides to protect Red Sea vessels from Houthi attacks," <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/02/19/eu-launches-mission-aspides-to-protect-red-sea-vessels-from-houthi-attacks>.

26 Council of the European Union (2024), *COUNCIL DECISION*.

## OPERATIONAL DYNAMICS: ASPIDES AND OPERATION PROSPERITY GUARDIAN

Previous experiences from naval involvement in and around the region have identified the need for cooperation for sharing the burden of tasks and resources. Before the ongoing Red Sea crisis, the EU and the US acknowledged the wider region as a maritime security interest. Yet, there has been a deficit in the military resources to address security concerns. In general, the number of frigates and destroyers in European navies has declined by 30 per cent from 1999 to 2018 as part of a decrease in national defense spending in many European states.<sup>27</sup> In order to intercept the Houthis, the current operations require vessels that are specifically equipped with surface-to-air missiles,<sup>28</sup> which further widens the pre-existing capability gap.

In a context of limited defence resources, the multinational nature of an operation in the region is an essential part of its long-term sustainability. Burden sharing among partners can facilitate logistical coordination, allowing ships to be restocked in port while partners maintain the naval presence. Cooperation with states in the region is also important in order to access local bases.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, coordination and cooperation between the various maritime-security instruments can ease and distribute the burden. Previously, there were calls for improved coordination between the European and US maritime-security instruments in the wider region.<sup>30</sup> Scholars highlight three important dynamics for cooperation to be effective in meeting the resource challenges and logistical considerations: a division of labour, a well-defined mandate, and clear political leadership.<sup>31</sup>

### Division of labour

A clear division of labour could resolve logistical considerations and the capability deficit.<sup>32</sup> There has been a division of labour in relation to certain efforts in the region. Regarding counterpiracy efforts, for instance, the US/

NATO has focused on wider geopolitical strategy issues, while the EU has prevented actual crime on the seas.<sup>33</sup>

However, there has also been a history of duplicate responses in the wider region. In 2019, increased tension between Iran and the US impacted commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>34</sup> The creation of the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) occurred at the same time as the US and UK formed the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC). The fragmented response could have been due to hesitations about former President Donald Trump's Iran policy, but the operations have not been merged since then.<sup>35</sup> Certain EU states may also have considered the US' complicated relations in the region as an obstacle to increased cooperation.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, the defensive nature of both Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian indicates that they are overlapping instead of following a division of labour approach. The reason for this duplication also suggests a similar pattern. Some European states are wary of joining an operation in the region due to political considerations and geopolitical tensions. There also seems to be a wish to disassociate from the current US operation.

For instance, states that have joined Aspides, such as Italy and France, are also contributing to Combined Maritime Forces, the umbrella mission that Operation Prosperity Guardian falls under, but these states are not joining Operation Prosperity Guardian.<sup>37</sup>

Although political considerations have contributed to the creation of two operations, they may also influence the operations moving forward. At times, the engagements of EU states in the region have been dictated by their national strategies, rather than a coherent EU approach. This has also been observed regarding the question of how national resources should be allocated between the various EU missions and operations.<sup>38</sup>

27 Mosly, A. (2023), "Enhancing Cooperation".

28 Svenska Dagbladet (2024), "Regeringen vill delta i insatser i Röda havet – 'mindre väpnad styrka'", February 8.

29 Willett, L. (2024), "Partner Navies Build Sustained Presence And Deterrence To Secure Red Sea Shipping", *Naval News*, January 26.

30 Mosly, A. (2023), "Enhancing Cooperation".

31 Bueger, C. and Edmunds, T. (2023) "The European Union's quest to become a global maritime-security provider", *Naval War College Review*, 76(2), pp. 67–86. Mosly, A. (2023), "Enhancing Cooperation".

32 Mosly, A. (2023), "Enhancing Cooperation".

33 Bueger, C. and Edmunds, T. (2023) "The European Union's".

34 BBC (2019), "Gulf of Oman tanker attacks: What we know", June 18.

35 Bueger, C. and Edmunds, T. (2023) "The European Union's".

36 Bianco, C. and Moretti, M. (2022), *Europe's role in Gulf maritime security*, Middle East Institute.

37 Stewart, P., Latona, D. and Amante, A. (2023), "US allies".

38 Grare, F. and Levaillant, M. (2022), *Getting Real about the Indo-Pacific Redefining European Approach to Maritime Security*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies.

**Table 2.** State contributions to security instruments in the wider region.<sup>(a)</sup>

	EMASoH <sup>(b)</sup>	Aspides	TF153 (CMF) <sup>(c)</sup>	IMSC <sup>(d)</sup>	OPG	Atalanta
<i>Aim</i>	Ensuring safe navigational environment and lowering tensions by promoting de-escalation mechanisms	Ensuring freedom of navigation for vessels	Focusing on international maritime security and capacity-building efforts	Deterring threats and reassuring regional mariners	Securing safe passage for commercial ships	Countering piracy, preventing smuggling, and protecting the World Food Programme
<i>Area of operation</i>	The Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and a part of the Arabian Sea	The Baab al-Mandab Straits and Strait of Hormuz, Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf	The Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden	In and around the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb	The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden	The Gulf of Aden and neighbouring countries, including the port and city of Muscat (Oman); Somali Basin; Red Sea; Gulf of Suez; and Gulf of Aqaba
<i>Australia</i>			X		X	
<i>Bahrain</i>			X	X	X	
<i>Belgium</i>	X	X	X			
<i>Canada</i>			X		X	
<i>Denmark</i>	X		X		X	
<i>France</i>	X	X	X			
<i>Germany</i>	X (only the diplomatic track of EMASoH)	X	X			
<i>Greece</i>	X	X	X			
<i>Italy</i>	X	X	X			X <sup>(e)</sup>
<i>Netherlands</i>	X		X			
<i>Norway</i>	X		X		X	
<i>Singapore</i>			X		X	
<i>Spain</i>			X			X
<i>Sweden</i>		X				
<i>Seychelles</i>			X	X	X	
<i>Portugal</i>	X (only the diplomatic track of EMASoH)		X			
<i>United Kingdom</i>			X	X	X	
<i>United States</i>			X	X	X	

**Remarks:** (a) Please note that this is not a comprehensive list of contributing states to the different instruments but an overview of states contributing to Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian. (b) EMASoH/ AGENOR (n.d.), About EMASoH, <https://www.emasoh-agenor.org/about->. (c) Combined Maritime Forces (n.d.) CTF 153: Red Sea Maritime Security, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/ctf-153-red-sea-maritime-security/>. (d) U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (2024), “International Maritime Security Construct Holds Change of Command”, February 20. (e) This is a list of states currently contributing. See European Union External Action Service (n.d), About, <https://eunavfor.eu/about-us>.



The details of the allocation of national resources between *Aspides* and Operation Prosperity Guardian are not public, but according to an EU proposal, it is up to member states to decide how to allocate their assets.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, as Operation Prosperity Guardian is a coalition of the willing, it is understood that states “can provide what they feel they can contribute, based on their national priorities and national domestic decisions”.<sup>40</sup> For instance, Denmark has sent a frigate to join the operation; according to the Danish government, the ship can also participate in *Aspides*.<sup>41</sup>

The EU stipulates that *Aspides* shall operate in “close cooperation with like-minded maritime security providers”.<sup>42</sup> One of the security providers that the EU has identified is EUNAVFOR Atalanta, which currently has the operational objective to counter piracy, prevent smuggling, and protect World Food Programme shipments in the maritime area around the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean.<sup>43</sup> Before the launch of *Aspides*, the EU considered building on or extending Atalanta as a means to respond to the Houthis.<sup>44</sup> *Aspides* was created partly because Spain was hesitant to extend Atalanta to the Red Sea, due to geopolitical tensions.<sup>45</sup>

The logistical considerations of a naval operation and the capability deficit among most states underline the importance of coordination between the different responses in ensuring overall security in the region.<sup>46</sup> Yet, the relationship between operational cohesion and states’ national strategies could be further complicated by the presence of two similar operations in the region.

In relation to the current crisis, former Italian Navy chief Luigi Binelli-Mantelli highlights that a fragmented international response to the current crisis would not affect the operational level, as navies are trained to work

in coordination. However, he maintains that, on a political level, the fragmentation illuminates a weakness.<sup>47</sup>

### Political leadership

The political dynamics related to the war in Gaza are influencing the operations’ political leadership. As some European electorates and political parties are increasingly critical of Israel’s actions in Palestine, EU member states fear that their presence in the Red Sea would indicate taking sides in the conflict.<sup>48</sup> For instance, Spain is refraining from joining both operations.<sup>49</sup> In a YouGov survey, Spaniards were considered the most pro-Palestinian (27 per cent) in Europe.<sup>50</sup>

There are also limitations to how much diplomatic effort could do to encourage the states in the region to cooperate with the operations. The Houthis’ support for Palestine makes it difficult for the region’s states to cooperate with *Aspides* and Operation Prosperity Guardian. As a result, Bahrain is the only Middle Eastern state openly joining Operation Prosperity Guardian. Additionally, even though Egyptian revenue from the Suez Canal decreased by 40 per cent in January 2024 compared to the previous year, Egypt, a member of CTF153, has declined to join Operation Prosperity Guardian, due to the sensitive nature of the operation.<sup>51</sup>

The Houthis’ connection to Iran has further complicated how much logistical cooperation is possible in the region. Many Arab states are seeking improved relations with Iran. These states are wary that their relations with Iran will be negatively impacted if they assist the US and other efforts to deter the Houthis. For instance, the United Arab Emirates has restricted the US from undertaking retaliatory airstrikes, originating from US facilities in the country, against Iranian proxies.<sup>52</sup>

39 Jones, M. G. and Psara, M. (2024), “EU mulls sending warships to protect Red Sea vessels from Houthi attacks”, *Euronews*, January 12; Rettman, A. (2024), “EU aiming to send three destroyers to Red Sea”, *Euobserver*, January 11.

40 Willett, L. (2023), “International Coalition Builds Deterrence Capacity Against Red Sea Shipping Threat”, *Naval New*, December 22.

41 Danish Defence (2024), *Dansk fregat ankommer i dag til Det Røde Hav og vil indgå i international maritim koalition*, February 8.

42 Council of the European Union (2024), *COUNCIL DECISION*.

43 European Union External Action Service (n.d.), *Mission*, <https://eunavfor.eu/mission>

44 Uysal, S. (2024), “The EU’s New Red Sea Naval Mission: Implications and Challenges”, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 16.

45 Ibid.

46 Mosly, A. (2023), “Enhancing Cooperation”.

47 Rettman, A. (2024), “Italian admiral: Red Sea muddle shows Nato ‘weakness’”, *Euobserver*, January 7.

48 Stewart, P., Latona, D. and Amante, A. (2023), “US allies”.

49 Jones, M. G. and Psara, M. (2024), “EU mulls sending warships”.

50 Smith, M. (2023), “Israel-Palestine: fundamental attitudes to the conflict among Western Europeans”, *YouGov*, December 20.

51 Maher, M. and Farid, M. (2024), “Cairo: Stuck between Securing the Red Sea and Avoiding a Perception of Support for Israel”, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*; Reuters (2024), “Egypt’s Suez Canal revenues down 40% due to Houthi attacks”, January 12.

52 Seligman, L., Ward, A., and Toosi, N. (2024), “UAE restricts US ability to launch retaliatory airstrikes against Iran proxies”, *POLITICO*, February 14.

## Political mandate

The sensitive political nature of a response to the Houthis makes it difficult to implement a well-defined mandate for the current crisis.<sup>53</sup> Experiences from the EU's efforts to enforce a UN arms embargo on Libya through its maritime operation Irini in the Mediterranean Sea underscore that political sensitivity can restrict an operation's mandate, as policymakers are merely agreeing "to the lowest common denominator".<sup>54</sup>

The mandate for Aspides is based on United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2722, which condemns the Houthis' attacks and affirms freedom of navigation. The resolution "takes note of the right of Member States, in accordance with international law, to defend their vessels from attacks, including those that undermine navigational rights and freedoms".<sup>55</sup> There are, however, different interpretations of what constitutes self-defence. For instance, the UK and the US are justifying their preventive attacks, outside Operation Prosperity Guardian, against the Houthis as a means of self-defence within the scope of Resolution 2722.<sup>56</sup> Contrastingly, the EU states interpretation of the resolution means that Aspides will not engage in similar pre-emptive measures.

Questions have also been raised about whether the defensive mandates of Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian are suited to their main purpose, which is to assure freedom of navigation in the region. According to some analysts, the current interpretation of what "defensive" entails could challenge Operation Prosperity Guardian's (but also most likely Aspides') "sustainability" which means that the operation may need to be modified in order to achieve its purpose.<sup>57</sup>

In sum, dynamics relating to division of labour, leadership, and mandate are already influencing Operation Prosperity Guardian and Aspides. The political considerations surrounding the war in Gaza are accentuating the challenges surrounding these dynamics.

A fragmented response to the Houthis has increased the international presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. As a result, the risk that the Houthis may eventually strike a military vessel is growing. At the same time, the Houthi attacks could cause an environmental disaster by targeting vessels carrying dangerous goods.<sup>58</sup> Attacks with serious consequences, targeted or accidental, will most likely call for a more forceful response from the states involved in the operations.<sup>59</sup> The next section considers how conflict dynamics in Yemen may influence Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian.

## CONFLICT DYNAMICS: THE YEMENI CIVIL WAR

In light of the Arab Spring, Yemen's authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, resigned. Two years later, in 2014, a civil war ensued.<sup>60</sup> To deter an allegedly increased Iranian influence in the country, a Saudi Arabian-led coalition intervened in Yemen. The civil war reached a ceasefire in 2022.<sup>61</sup>

Today, the Houthis control the northern highlands and most of the Red Sea coastline.<sup>62</sup> The UN-recognised Yemeni government controls nearly all of the eastern regions. The government no longer perceives that there is a ceasefire as the "Houthis are using drones quite intensively, indeed daily".<sup>63</sup> Due to the infighting, there is an ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

Any international operation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden will be affected not only by operational dynamics but also by various conflict dynamics present in the Yemeni civil war. The current crisis shows similarities in how international engagement has occurred in previous civil wars, such as in Afghanistan and Somalia. In those conflict dynamics, the international actors underestimated the belligerents' capacity and endurance and misinterpreted their motives. The conflict dynamics in Yemen could affect the extent to which Operation Prosperity Guardian and Aspides can meet their operational goals.

53 Freebairn, T. (2024), "Operation Prosperity Guardian Faces Early Hurdles", *Defense and Security Monitor*, January 2.

54 Lund, A. (2022), *EU på djupt vatten? Operation Irini, Medelhavsmigrationen och Libyenkonflikten*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, p. 9.

55 United Nations Security Council (2024) Res 2722, January 10, S/RES/2722

56 Psaropoulos, J. (2024), "UK takes centre stage in Red Sea action, targeting Yemen's Houthis", *Al Jazeera*, January 16.

57 Freebairn, T. (2024), "Operation Prosperity Guardian Faces Early Hurdles", *Defense and Security Monitor*, January 2.

58 Recently, the Houthis hit an oil tanker but, luckily, the fire that the impact caused could be extinguished; Gambrell, J (2024), "Crews extinguish fire on tanker hit by Houthi missile off Yemen after US targets rebels in airstrike", *Associated Press*, January 27.

59 Stewart, P., Latona, D. and Amante, A. (2023), "US allies reluctant".

60 Bland, A. and McKernan, B. (2024), "Who are the Houthis and how did the US and UK strikes on Yemen come about?", *The Guardian*, January 12.

61 Wintour, P. (2024), "Airstrikes against Houthis are not enough, says Yemeni official", *The Guardian*, January 15.

62 Bland, A. and McKernan, B. (2024), "Who are the Houthis and how did the US and UK strikes on Yemen come about?", *The Guardian*, January 12; Al Jazeera (2024), "Who are the Houthis? A simple guide to the Yemeni group", January 12.

63 Wintour, P. (2024), "Airstrikes against Houthis".

## Underestimating the Houthis' capacity and endurance

The EU and the US may indeed be underestimating the Houthis' capacity and endurance. Similar to the civil wars in Afghanistan and Somalia, where the international community misjudged the Taliban and Al Shabaab, the UK Ministry of Defence claimed, after the first pre-emptive air strikes, "that the Houthis' ability to threaten merchant shipping ha[d] taken a blow".<sup>64</sup> However, since those attacks, the Houthis have maintained the capacity to retaliate. In the case of Afghanistan and Somalia, misgauging the insurgency resulted in mission creep and/or unexpected protracted conflict.<sup>65</sup>

The experience from the Yemeni civil war indicates that, with the help of Iran, the Houthis have persevered in the face of the Saudi coalition despite having inferior capabilities. For instance, on paper, Saudi Arabia has had the upper hand vis-à-vis the Houthis. In 2022, as the world's largest arms importer, it had a military expenditure amounting to 7.4 per cent of GDP.<sup>66</sup> The Houthis import Iranian weapons through clandestine networks.<sup>67</sup> The Houthis' stockpile reportedly includes anti-ship cruise missiles, naval mines, and waterborne improvised explosive devices, as well as cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and weaponised drones.<sup>68</sup>

Despite their theoretically inferior capability, the cost that the Houthis carry for one of their attacks is relatively low in comparison to the cost carried by international actors in intercepting those same attacks.<sup>69</sup> The Houthis' drones are much cheaper than the surface-to-air missiles used to intercept them.<sup>70</sup> Another Houthi advantage is that international actors need to consider civilian casualties, whereas the Houthis may not give them as much weight.<sup>71</sup>

Throughout the civil war, the Houthis have learned how to endure significant aerial attacks. Between March 2015 and January 18, 2024, a Saudi-led coalition carried out 25,054 air raids on the Houthis.<sup>72</sup> In addition, the

Houthis have improved their capabilities, as they have carried out maritime offensive operations for the duration of the war against the Saudi-led coalition.<sup>73</sup> As the Yemeni civil war is entering its 10th year, Saudi Arabia has ceased its offensive against the Houthis.

The UN-recognised Yemeni government maintains that the current efforts against the Houthis will not suffice to restore maritime security. The government has highlighted that one weakness of the Saudi-led coalition was that it did not supplement its air strikes with sufficient boots on the ground. Thus, the Houthis have become experts in persevering in the face of aerial attacks. For instance, the Houthis reportedly store their artillery underground. As a result, the Yemeni government suggests that it needs arms, intelligence-sharing, capacity-building, and training to deter the Houthis.<sup>74</sup>

Due to the Houthis' endurance, the international response may take longer than initially anticipated. The pre-emptive attack on the Houthis may have reduced their capacity to disrupt maritime security, but it is unlikely to stop them. This could mean that, to achieve maritime security, *Aspides* and *Operation Prosperity Guardian* may need to be more or less permanent features in the region.

## Misinterpreting the Houthis' motives

There is a risk that the EU and the US misinterpret the motivations driving the Houthis. As learned from previous experiences in civil wars in Afghanistan and Somalia, the Houthis may be motivated to continue their attacks in an effort not only to bolster their legitimacy among the Yemeni population but also to gain regional prestige.<sup>75</sup> This may present a challenge to the operations if one of their goals is to deter the Houthis from continuing attacks on international shipping.

The Houthis' proclaimed support for Palestine might strengthen their domestic legitimacy. Before the attacks started, the Houthis were reportedly losing popular support

64 Psaropoulos, J. (2024), "UK takes centre stage".

65 Williams, P. (2022), "US intervention in Afghanistan and the failure of governance", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 33(7), pp. 1130–1151.

66 The World Bank (2022), *Military expenditure (% of GDP)*, [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?most_recent_year_desc=false).

67 Holmquist, E., Lund, A., and Neuman Bergenwal, S. (2023), *Proliferation of Iranian missile technology in the Middle East*, Swedish Defence Research Agency.

68 Crisis24 (2024), "Further attacks in Red Sea and Gulf of Aden likely through late January following US and UK airstrikes against Al-Houthi targets – Context", January 15.

69 Bland, A. and McKernan, B. (2024), "Who are the Houthis".

70 Rettman, A. (2024), "Italian admiral".

71 Bergen, P. (2024), "Opinion: For the Houthis, war is a way of life", *CNN*, January 17.

72 The Yemen Data Project (n.d.), Yemen Conflict Observatory, [yemendataproject.org](http://yemendataproject.org)

73 Crisis24 (2024), "Arabian Peninsula".

74 Wintour, P. (2024), "Airstrikes against Houthis".

75 Karlsson, M. (2017) *Unstable elite relations and their reproduction: From Mogadishu to the Afghan Region*, Griffith University; Little, P. (2003), *Somalia: Economy without State*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.



in Yemen.<sup>76</sup> Yemenites were discontent with the Houthis' draconian rule and malfunctioning institutions. The attacks have allowed the Houthis to distract the local population.<sup>77</sup> In addition, human rights groups worry that increased popular support, which allows the Houthis to consolidate power, will increase their human rights abuses.<sup>78</sup>

Increased popular legitimacy may also bolster the Houthis' recruitment capacity and standing in the Yemeni civil war.<sup>79</sup> For instance, increased recruitment could help the Houthis extricate themselves from the current stalemate over the city of Marib and its oil fields.<sup>80</sup> Recruitment to the Houthi forces has apparently increased since they started their attacks on shipping.<sup>81</sup>

The Houthi attacks are occurring in light of peace negotiations between the Houthis and the Yemeni government. The Houthis may use their current attacks as a way to gain an advantage in the negotiations.<sup>82</sup> Similar patterns have been observed in Afghanistan and Somalia, where some actors used violence to increase their standing in the peace negotiations. In those cases, this awarded the actors more legitimacy at the expense of actual reconciliation.<sup>83</sup>

The Houthis' popular support also appears to be increasing in Arab states. One analyst describes the Houthis as being “‘masterful’ at propaganda”, which means that their support for Palestine, despite being ideological, may also be a strategy to leverage more support in the region for themselves.<sup>84</sup> For instance, the Houthis may improve their standing “in the Iran-led ‘axis of resistance’” against the West as they gain prestige from disrupting international trade.<sup>85</sup> The regional dimension of conflict has largely been overlooked when the international community has engaged in conflicts such as those involving Somalia and Afghanistan.<sup>86</sup>

In previous conflicts such as the one in Afghanistan, proxies often used their regional and international beneficiaries to achieve power.<sup>87</sup> However, fragmentation within these groups or changes in geopolitics meant that the groups easily changed their beneficiaries if necessary.<sup>88</sup> Yemeni experts disagree regarding the Houthis' autonomy in relation to Iran.<sup>89</sup> It is widely acknowledged, however, that the Houthis' ideology has become increasingly influenced by Iran. This “Iranisation” is considered intentional on Iran's part and a necessity for the Houthis.

One possibility is that the Houthis develop into a Hezbollah-type organisation with de facto control over Yemen. However, the Houthis have more autonomy than Hezbollah and are not as predictable. As one Yemen expert highlights, the Houthis are “fine to collaborate when it suits them, and they have no problem stabbing you in the back when it doesn't”.<sup>90</sup> According to this reasoning, while an end to Iranian weapon supply could affect the Houthis' abilities to attack international shipping, the Houthis may still be motivated to do so.

Experience from Afghanistan and Somalia indicates that groups like the Houthis thrive in ungoverned situations. If these assumptions are correct, they raise the question of whether the Houthis would cease their attacks (which they did during a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel) permanently if the war in Gaza ended.<sup>91</sup> An end to the war in Gaza could perhaps end the Houthis' attacks. However, the more the pre-emptive airstrikes by Poseidon Archer target the Houthis, the more likely the Houthis are to perceive themselves as at war with these actors.<sup>92</sup> These dynamics could influence maritime operations in terms of how long their presence would be required in the region.

76 England, A. (2024), “Houthi militancy drags troubled Yemen back into conflict”, *Financial Times*, February 15.

77 Jalabi R. (2024), “Thank God for the Houthis: why Arab world is backing Yemen rebels”, *Financial Times*, January 26.

78 Ibid.

79 Thamer, M. and Akkas, B. (2024), “Red Sea hostilities: local, regional, and international implications”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 30.

80 Ibid.

81 Crisis Group (2024), “What Next After U.S. and UK Strikes on the Houthis?”, January 13.

82 Thamer, M. and Akkas, B. (2024), “Red Sea hostilities”.

83 Karlsson, M. (2017) *Unstable elite relations*. Webersik, Christian (2014), “Bargaining for the Spoils of War: Somalia's Failing Path from War to Peace”, *African Security*, 7(4), pp. 277–302.

84 Jalabi R. (2024), “Thank God”.

85 Bland, A. and McKernan, B. (2024), “Who are the Houthis”.

86 Holmquist, E. and Rock, A. I. (2023), *Regional Security Dynamics in the Horn of Africa*, Swedish Defence Research Agency.

87 Dorronsoro, G. (2005), *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present*, New York: Columbia University Press.

88 Karlsson, M. (2017) *Unstable elite relations*.

89 Bergen, P. (2024), “Opinion”.

90 Ibid.

91 Salhani J. (2024), “Are the Houthi Red Sea interceptions going to bring about a regional war?”, *Al Jazeera*, January 15; Bergen, P. (2024), “Opinion”.

92 Crisis Group (2024), “What Next After U.S.”.

The Yemeni conflict dynamics could mean that Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian will have to extend their mandates to achieve maritime security in the region. However, the tense climate in the region, as well as hesitation to repeat the protracted involvement in previous conflicts, make increased international military engagements in Yemen unlikely. Yet, the unclear political mandate of the operations, the increased risk of significant loss of life and property, and the unintentional benefits the operations may produce for the Houthis could increase the risk of mission creep.

### **POSING STRATEGIC QUESTIONS: ASPIDES AND OPERATION PROSPERITY GUARDIAN MOVING FORWARD**

A number of dynamics will influence how Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian evolve. Political tension related to the war in Gaza has so far posed some challenges in relation to the operations' mandates, political leadership, and division of labour. At the same time, the Houthis may perceive that they gain regional prestige and domestic legitimacy from the attacks, and may therefore benefit from the prolonged presence of international maritime involvement in the region. In light of all of these dynamics, an important strategic question arises:

- How can the EU and the US establish maritime security in the region without escalating their engagement and protracting the Yemeni conflict?

Based on the analysis presented here, the following questions are also of strategic significance:

- How can the operations find synergies in light of political fragmentation?
- How can the operations foster further coordination with governments in the region?
- How long can the operations sustain their deterrence efforts?
- How will the presence of two operations in the region affect operational cohesion?

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