



SAGE Intelligence Brief–

Operation Prosperity Guardian & U.S.-led Strikes on the Houthis

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Situation Overview:

The Houthi insurgency in Yemen poses a significant threat to international maritime trade, particularly at the strategic chokepoint, Bab El Mandeb, a vital entrance/exit to the Red Sea from the Indian Ocean. Houthi military actions have compelled numerous cargo companies to reroute vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, raising shipping costs. Concurrently, the Panama Canal, another crucial trade route, operates at minimal capacity due to drought, compounding the impact on global shipping.

A Saudi-led military intervention (supported by the U.S. as part of its Global War of Terrorism) in Yemen (2015-22) caused one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters and left the country in tatters – with 4.5 million internally displaced people and with two-thirds of the country's population dependent on humanitarian assistance. The country is now effectively divided into three – the Iranian-backed Houthis control the country's northwest (25 percent of the country), the Saudi-backed, internationally recognised Sunni Yemeni government controls the centre (55 percent of the country) and the Emirati-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) controls the southeast (20 percent of the country).

Operational Implications:

Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPG), led by the United States, aims to address the maritime security threat posed by the Houthi forces. Leveraging advanced intelligence capabilities, OPG intends to identify and track mobile and static Houthi military targets using SATINT, Geospatial, SIGINT, and electronic intelligence. The U.S.-led naval coalition boasts technological superiority, enabling coordinated air and missile strikes on selected Houthi targets. **PREDICTION** – it is likely that in coming weeks, Operation Prosperity Guardian will evolve into an offensive military action against the Houthis in order to relieve pressure on the critical Red Sea/Suez Canal trading route.

Strategic Considerations:

ASSUMPTION – in the likelihood of OPG vessels mounting an offensive operation WITHOUT significant ground-support from the Gulf States.

A primary objective will involve strangling maritime trade from Iran to Yemen through a blockade, limiting Houthi resupply. Deploying special forces into Houthi territory poses risks, with potential for close-quarter engagements and American casualties. The risk of unintended consequences, such as Houthi use of IEDs or suicide bombings in built-up civilian areas, could trigger domestic and international backlash, affecting public and media perceptions.

Houthi Defensive Strategies:

Anticipating a cut-off of Iranian resupply, the Houthis may hide weapons in civilian areas, potentially employing civilians as 'human shields.' This dual strategy aims to preserve military capability while limiting the impact of allied airstrikes. Houthi forces operating in small, concealed units pose challenges for airpower, especially if integrated among the civilian population – as per Hamas vs. Israel post October 7, 2023.

Post-Strike Environment:

Given Yemen's status as a failed state, the likelihood of a post-strike stabilization mission is low. The fragmented geopolitical landscape, with Saudi and Emirati spheres of influence, adds complexity. Riyadh's interest in countering Iranian influence may lead to renewed military actions against weakened Houthi forces.

Recommendation:

In light of the challenges posed by the Houthi insurgency and the limitations of air and missile strikes, a recommendation is made for Washington policymakers to seek direct Saudi support for a ground invasion of Houthi territory. Simultaneously, the U.S.-led multinational taskforce can execute selected air and missile strikes on known Houthi military targets. Opening a northern land front may force the Houthis into a two-front war, complicating their defensive planning and potentially leading to their decisive defeat.

About SAGE International:

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