



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Attack on Houthis - can the US get out of the gap of regional escalation?



The US government is in a dilemma over whether to attack Houthi militia positions in Yemen and thus eliminate the danger of new attacks on military and civilian ships in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

The previous strategy of US forces in the region was defensive and successful in protecting military and civilian ships from destruction.

However, that is not enough for the militant pro-Iranian militia to stop its combat operations. Since November 19, when the Houthis first **attacked**, there have been 23 attacks on commercial ships in the region.

The administration of President Joe Biden has been under pressure to use force against Houthi forces and their installations on the coast to eliminate the danger to navigation.

On the other hand, the pressure is just as high not to do so because intervention on the targets in the territory of Yemen would undoubtedly mark a new escalation of the conflict in the Middle East.

One step closer to attack

A coalition of forces from 13 countries, led by the US, **issued** a warning to the Houthis that they will "bear the responsibility of the consequences" should they continue to threaten lives and the free passage of ships through one of the most significant global trade corridors.

The statement from the Allies serves as a last warning before a strike, for which unofficial preparations are under way, and attacks against land-based military infrastructure, primarily weapon depots and radars, are anticipated.

There is no indication that the pro-Iranian forces in Yemen could stop the actions on their own

However, regardless of the warning tone, the action must be preceded not so much by time as by good judgement regarding all the consequences it would bring.

Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea region have been continuous for a month and a half, and represent a significant escalation of the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, something that all regional factors, but also the US and its allies, wanted not to happen.

There is no indication that the pro-Iranian forces in Yemen could stop these actions on their own, as their goal is to harm Israel and force its allies to pressure Israel to halt the operation in Gaza.

Legal basis

The US and its allies have a legal basis for offensive action against the Houthis. Their attacks on the US ships USS Mason and USS Carney could be **qualified** as aggression, even though they did not come from another state but from an armed group. The response to these attacks, and potentially some new ones, could be treated as an act of self-defence.

In addition, all permanent members of the UN Security Council **condemned** the attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea region at the first session of the year on January 4, even though some of them (China and Russia) did not name the Houthis as the attackers.

The UN's consensus and the legal framework alone will not make it simple to decide on a possible strike on the Houthi infrastructure.

The US National Security Strategy obliges the government not to allow "foreign or regional powers to jeopardise freedom of navigation"

The US is in a difficult situation regarding making such a decision. The US National Security Strategy obliges the government not

to allow "foreign or regional powers to jeopardise freedom of navigation" through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait at the entrance to the Red Sea.

Also, the armed response of the US has been imposed as the only decisive protection of the American troops in the broader region of the Middle East, particularly the navy that patrols the waters around the Arabian Peninsula.

Pressure also comes from Israel, as the largest US ally in the region, which demands US military action against the Houthis, or else it will take it itself, as stated by PM Benjamin Netanyahu.

Internal political dynamics in the US have been forcing the decision regarding offensive action against the Houthis. Amid the election campaign, President Biden could hardly allow himself exposure to accusations that he is weak and indecisive in protecting US interests in the Middle East and disrupted international navigation due to the actions of the pro-Iranian militia.

Risks of a possible action

However, the risks of possible action by the US and its allies are equally substantial. In doing so, the US would transition from its earlier policy of restraint and defensive military action as a last resort to one of direct military involvement in the escalation and spill over of the Gaza conflict to a broader region. The United States would participate in what it and its Middle Eastern partners have been attempting to stop since October 7.

The Arab states would oppose such an engagement and barely support the US because, in this way, they would demonstrate that they are cooperating militarily with the US as the biggest and most influential supporter of Israel in its fight against Hamas.

After all, only one Arab country, Bahrain, has joined the US-led coalition that protects navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden risk zones.

The position of Saudi Arabia in this regard is possibly decisive for the positioning of the US. Possible military action against the Houthis would, at first glance, suit the interests of Saudi Arabia because it has been in a long-term conflict with the Houthis.

It has invested most in the fragile peace established in Yemen in 2022, and an escalation with the US would undoubtedly renew the conflict inside Yemen, thus forcing Saudi Arabia to (once again) spend billions of dollars a month to support government forces in the fight against the Houthis.



There is still room for diplomatic action before the US and its regional partners – US State secretary Blinken meets with King Abdullah of Jordan

A possible US attack on the Houthis would also put Saudi Arabia in a difficult political position, considering its recently renewed diplomatic ties with Iran as the principal sponsor of the Houthis.

The intervention of the US would undoubtedly strengthen the ties between Iran and the Houthis. It would bring about a new mobilisation of their unity, in which Saudi Arabia would have to weigh between the partnership with the US and the newly renewed ties with Iran mediated by China, also a very significant partner for Riyadh.

The Kingdom would not want to find itself in such a position because it would harm its ambitions regarding regional leadership. That is why, since the beginning of the conflict between Israel and Hamas, it has been one of the loudest advocates of preventing the spill over of the conflict to other parts of the region.

There is still room for diplomatic action before the US and its regional partners, and they have been using it as a possible way out of a complex perspective during the ongoing visit of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to the Middle East.

The US, along with the UK and a dozen allies, have already expressed readiness to respond militarily to Houthi forces on the ground. However, it will be the final course of action if the reasons against it do not prevail, which could come primarily from the Arab partners.