

Yemen's Houthis have struck again – but what would a wider escalation put at risk?

Yemen's Iran-allied Houthi movement has launched ballistic missiles towards southern Israel, opening what could become a new front in an already widening conflict.

On Saturday, the group's military spokesperson, Brigadier-General Yahya Saree, said the Houthis "will continue until the declared objectives are achieved and the aggression against all fronts of the resistance ceases."

Until now, the group has largely stayed on the sidelines of the regional war, leading many analysts to focus less on willingness than on restraint. The latest attack has sharpened a central question: what would be at stake if the Houthis were to escalate further?

This is not the first time the Houthis have acted in the region against Israel. After October 7, 2023, the group launched attacks on vessels in the Red Sea in support of Palestinians in Gaza. On that occasion, they demonstrated their ability to unsettle regional security and global trade far beyond Yemen's borders.

One of the clearest and most immediate risks of a wider escalation would be in the Red Sea, where the Houthis control the Bab al-Mandab strait – a key chokepoint through which a significant share of global energy shipments passes.

Iona Craig, a journalist who has reported extensively on Yemen and is affiliated with the Yemen Data Project, said the consequences of its potential closure, with the Strait of Hormuz already under pressure, would be "monumental." "Global markets would be severely impacted," she said, making inflation across Europe and the U.S. "inevitable and much higher."

Yet whether the Houthis will go that far remains less certain. Ideologically, the group is aligned with Iran's broader regional agenda, which consists of "the physical elimination of Israel, and the fight against the Great Satan, which is the United States," Laura Silvia Battaglia al-Jalal, an Italian journalist who works between Italy and Yemen, explained.

In her view, that alignment could still matter if Tehran were to seek a deeper Houthi involvement in the conflict. "The mentality is that of people devoted to martyrdom, both individual and collective, and they would intervene if Iran asked them to," she added.

Moreover, after its latest operation in the Red Sea, the group has cemented its role within the so-called 'Axis of Resistance', at a time when other regional actors appeared weakened or close to collapse, as seen in Syria under Assad.

“Iran considers the Houthis, following that operation, as reliable and courageous members of its network, and as a group that is willing to go further than others,” said Yasmeen al-Eryani, of the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies.

Still, that does not necessarily mean the group is ready to escalate without restraint. Al-Eryani described their decision-making as shaped by two main priorities: preserving the group’s leadership and maintaining its military capabilities. In practice, the Houthis seek to avoid both internal dissent and the external threat of decapitation, as seen in Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Part of that caution is also ideological. While the group shares the broader anti-Israel and anti-U.S. ideology of the ‘Axis of Resistance’, its religious foundations are different, as it follows Zaydi Shiism.

“As they do not subscribe to the notion of Guardianship of the Jurist, they do not feel a sense of religious duty to defend the Islamic Republic, which makes them different from Hezbollah,” explained Tom Walsh, a lecturer in International Relations at King’s College London.

Speaking before Saturday’s strike on Israel, Walsh described the Houthis as “pragmatic” enough to understand that entering the war more directly on Iran’s side could weaken their domestic position and expose them to renewed Western retaliation.

That may help explain why, despite their latest move, the Houthis’ next step remains uncertain. Also, the group appears weaker today than it was before its 2023 campaign in the Red Sea, and preserving its survival has become more difficult after repeated U.S. strikes.

Battaglia noted that part of their missile infrastructure was destroyed in the U.S. campaign two years ago. “The missiles used at the time against Israel were launched from mobile platforms, especially in the Hodeidah area, which has been heavily bombed,” she said.

A similar point was made by Yasmeen al-Eryani, who also pointed to the internal situation in the country, where the humanitarian crisis plays a crucial role in shaping the group’s calculation over further escalation.

Today, “Yemen relies heavily on assistance from Saudi Arabia, and if it becomes preoccupied with more immediate security threats, the country risks losing a critical lifeline of support.”

That channel opened in 2023, when Riyadh entered into talks with the Houthis, pledging to pay salaries in areas under their control, reopen ports and work toward the withdrawal of foreign forces.

Those understandings were upended in October, following the group's intervention in the Red Sea, but the diplomatic bridge remains open. That fragile opening, alongside the unstable truce with the United States, may be one of the few incentives pushing the Houthis away from a wider escalation.

Within this frame there is a population that has been strained by years of wars, facing deep economic collapse and what the United Nations has repeatedly described as one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. This year, that crisis has only worsened with cuts to international aid, while key ports through which assistance enters the country could become even more vulnerable in the event of a wider war, al-Eryani said.

She also said that, within the Houthis' strategic calculations, the population ranks low among their priorities. Yet public support still matters. If the Red Sea campaign in 2023 was framed as a sacrifice for Palestinians, a wider confrontation in support of Iran would be much harder to justify to a population already pushed to its limits.

For now, the latest strike may have shown willingness, but not yet a full escalation in the region. The Houthis have sent a clear warning, demonstrating they can still widen the war. What remains unclear is whether, under growing military, diplomatic and domestic pressure, they can still afford to do so.